



# The SILK ROAD

Central Asia, Afghanistan and Iran

A TRAVEL COMPANION

Jonathan Tucker

With a foreword by

PAUL THEROUX

I.B. TAURIS

**Jonathan Tucker** is a former associate director of the Indian and Southeast Asian department at Spink and Son and has operated a gallery in St James's, London, with his wife Antonia Tozer since 2000. He is also a consultant for Bonhams and is a recognised authority in the field of Indian and Southeast Asian art, particularly in sculpture. He lived in Asia for eleven years and spent many years exploring the ancient trade routes between China and Europe, travelling the entire length of the Silk Road with the exception of Iraq. He is the author of *The Silk Road: Art and History* (Philip Wilson Publishers), an illustrated and annotated map of the Silk Road for Odyssey Travel Guides; *The Silk Road: China and the Karakorum Highway* (I.B. Tauris); and *The Troublesome Priest: Harold Davidson, Rector of Stiffkey*.

Praise for Jonathan Tucker's *The Silk Road: Art and History*.

‘An enormous and beautiful book [...], the most informative work on the subject I have yet seen.’

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‘Jonathan Tucker’s handsome and informative new volume fills an important niche [...] [It] conveys a palpable sense of place without losing the monumentality of scale and panoramic sweep.’

Annette L. Juliano, *Orientations*

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‘A most handsome volume, admirable in scope and reliable in detail [...] it will serve as a treasured compendium.’

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*Asian Affairs*

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*Minerva*

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For Antonia, Jack and Grace

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# Foreword

## by Paul Theroux

When I first travelled to India and Pakistan in the 1960s, Afghanistan in the 1970s and China in 1980, each seemed ancient and fixed. How was I to know that nothing in this world is fixed? But with the passage of time, and more travel, I understood how change and decay are the rule. And seeking that understanding is one of the greatest reasons to travel. Though many travellers search for ancient splendours, and some find them, it is an illusion to think that lastingness is the condition of the world.

I like this description by Jonathan Tucker, in his marvellous book, of Hadda near Jalalabad:

One of Hadda's monasteries, Tapa-i-Shotor, escaped the ravages of the Hepthalites and until only a few years ago still contained large stucco sculptures of the Buddha flanked by attendants, with influences from the classical world. It did not survive the Taliban era, however, and today Tapa-i-Shotor consists of little more than a mound of earth and a few flakes of gold leaf.

Afghanistan was ruled by a gilt-edged king 40 years ago, and in his kingdom one of his subjects in Herat, upon seeing my gold watch, begged me to swap an old musket inlaid with ivory for it. It was impossible for me to make an international telephone call in India on their six pound bakelite telephones, though had I the money I could have bought a brand new steam locomotive; or in the bazaar at Peshawar a Maitreya plundered from one of the Gandhara monasteries. Now India makes cell phones, and the Peshawar bazaar deals in assault weapons.

China in 1980 was ruled by Mao's chosen successor, Hua Guofeng – his portrait on every wall that I saw on my way down the Yangtze Kiang, along with Maoist big-letter slogans on canyon walls, 'Crush Imperialism', 'Serve the People'. China was threadbare, and joyless; everyone wearing blue suits and cloth slippers, many of them yoked to tables in factories where they made

thermos jugs and bikes and small appliances. The Cultural Revolution was four years in the past, a nightmarish memory for all, too awful to discuss. What was going to happen next? Impossible to know, or even guess at. Six years later I returned, Deng Xiaoping the reformer was now in power, people were talkative, women's clothes more colourful, and under the cranes and bulldozers in Shanghai, a new city rising, I asked an American who'd lived there for many years what he thought was going to happen.

'I don't know,' he said. 'We didn't know this was going to happen.'

China is disaster-prone, and its history, like that of the Silk Road that linked it to the world, is filled with danger and uncertainty, as well as glory and riches. Aware of the cycle of catastrophes in their national past, the Chinese take nothing for granted. And this is why the Silk Road, so vital and detailed in Tucker's telling, has existed like a living thing, not merely sinuous and full of incident, but anfractuous and dramatic, where the only certainty is the unexpected.

All my travelling life, in Africa and Asia, I have encountered mud villages and rough stone walls and peasants grubbing the earth in fields. The modern conceit is that urbanisation has taken hold, that India is an economic miracle, that China is the next superpower. Tell that to the peasants in the villages of Africa and Asia. In populations of more than a billion there exist many anachronistic pockets of the old world. You can take a high-speed train, four hours, from Beijing to Xian, and a short drive into the rocky hills will introduce you to a village of rough huts, peasants cooking on wood fires or ploughing fields with water buffalo, a scene that would be familiar to any of the ancient travellers on the Silk Road recounted in this book.

Scholarly and detailed, this volume is a great reference as well as a guide-book, with portraits of the little-known travellers as well as the great ones – Marco Polo, Fa Xian, Xuanzang; and the poet Rumi (Mawlana Jalaluddin Balkhi); the many twisting caravan routes, the marchers upon them, and the merchants. And it is up to date, remarking on the paradoxical revival of the Silk Road in our time, how after the attack on the World Trade Center, NATO vehicles, fuel and food aid, were passing along the fabled road; how one of the road's magnificent features, the great Buddhas of Bamiyan were blown up by

the Taliban.

You could almost say of Jonathan Tucker, as he quotes an admirer in verse of the great fourteenth-century traveller Ibn Battuta,

He it was who hung the world,  
that turning wheel of diverse parts,  
upon the axis of a book.

## Preface

There was a rare and probably unique interlude between 1990 and 11 September 2001, when more-or-less all of the Silk Road was sufficiently safe and secure to explore. When I began travelling it in the early 1990s I sensed that a rare opportunity existed; with most of the countries along the route enjoying a period of peace, borders were open, the old sites still survived, cities and monuments could be seen and recorded, and the ancient ways still discovered. As I write these words today, some 20 years later, there have been wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, ethnic and religious upheavals the length and breadth of the Silk Road and a lingering threat of conflict with Iran over nuclear weapons. The great Silk Road cities of Damascus, Homs and Aleppo (including the great Al-Madina Souq and the Umayyad Mosque) are being shot to pieces; Palmyra and the Crusader castle of Krak des Chevaliers are under mortal threat; the Buddhas of Bamiyan are rubble; Baghdad and Samarra are bombed and blasted; Mosul and Hatra are occupied by ISIS militants; Samarkand is spruced up and characterless; and Kashgar's ancient quarter is all but gone.

The notion that these cities have been destroyed and rebuilt throughout history is a specious one: we are supposed to be part of an enlightened era in which the past is cherished and preserved, museums built, history re-enacted and celebrated on TV and in film. Two-and-a-half million people a year visit Pompeii, pre-revolution Egypt welcomed 14 million tourists in 2010, and last year, 5.5 million visitors graced the polished corridors of the British Museum. There is no doubt that we revere the past, and yet the traces of the Grand Old Road are fading inexorably away. I implore anyone with an interest in the culture and history of East and West, and the exchange of ideas between them, to visit some of the places described in this book, and in its companion: *The Silk Road – China and the Karakorum Highway*. If current trends continue, a generation from now many of these places will be no more than a memory.

Note on the Translation of the Poetry  
and Prose When poetry and other forms  
of literature are translated from another  
language, the quality of translation is  
almost as important as the original text.  
When several versions of the same text  
are available I have tried to use the one  
that is the most evocative and best  
captures the atmosphere of the time or  
place.



**MAP 1**

The Silk Road – land and sea routes.

# INTRODUCTION

## Merchants, Monks and Migrants: The Traffic of the Silk Road You, my friends, and you strangers, all of you,

Stand with me a little by the walls  
Or where the walls once were.  
The bridge was here, the city further:  
Now there is neither bridge nor town –  
A doorway where the roof is down  
Opens on a foot-worn stair  
That climbs by three steps into empty air.  
(What foot went there?)  
Nothing in this town that had a thousand steeples  
Lives now but these flocks of sheep  
Grazing the yellow grasses where the bricks lie dead beneath.

(Archibald MacLeish (1892–1982), ‘The Sheep in the Ruins’)

Baron Ferdinand Von Richtofen first coined the term ‘Silk Road’, or *Seidenstrasse*, in 1877, but it is a misnomer. It was not really a road at all; it was a vast network of land-based and maritime trade routes and the merchants who used it carried far, far more than just silk. The beginnings of land-based trade between Orient and Occident can probably be pinpointed to around 105 BC, when the Chinese Emperor Wudi (r.140–87 BC) sent a group of Chinese emissaries to the court of Mithradates II (r.123–88 BC), the Parthian ruler of Persia. Wudi’s mission appears to have marked the beginnings of trade with Persia. In 53 BC the Persians unfurled dazzling silk banners during their battle with the Romans at Carrhae. The Romans are said to have fled in terror at the sight of the banners and were routed.

By 46 BC, however, Chinese silks had reached Rome. A triumphal procession

for Julius Caesar in that year included silk canopies, and it was not long before the commentators of the day were lamenting the Romans' obsession with the new material and the drain it placed upon the economy. So pervasive was the new fashion that in 14 BC Rome's Senate was obliged to issue a ban against men 'disgracing themselves with the effeminate delicacy of silk apparel', but to little effect, it seems. The Roman commentator Seneca, writing in the first century AD, makes no attempt to hide his disapproval of women who wore silk: Silk garments provide no protection for the body, or indeed modesty, so that when a woman wears them she can scarcely [...] swear that she is not naked.

(Seneca, first century AD, *On Benefits*) During the first century AD, as trade increased between Rome and the East, many commentators criticised the apparently insatiable appetite among Romans for luxury goods: we have come now to see [...] journeys made to Seres<sup>1</sup> [China] to obtain cloth, the abysses of the Red Sea explored for pearls, and the depths of the earth scoured for emeralds. They have even taken up the notion of piercing the ears as if it were too small a matter to wear those gems in necklaces and tiaras unless holes were also made in the body into which to insert them [...] at the lowest computation, India and Seres and the [Arabian] Peninsula together drain our empire of one hundred million sesterces every year. That is the price that our luxuries and our womankind cost us.

(Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*)

Trade between East and West was to continue, despite interruptions caused by wars, pestilence and politics, until maritime routes pioneered by European explorers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries superseded the old highways. At different times and throughout its history, trading centres grew and prospered along the highways of the Silk Road. Great cities like the Abbasid capital of Baghdad, the Sogdian town of Samarkand and the Bactrian metropolis of Merv became dynamic entrepôts where goods were traded in both directions. Merchants did not lead their caravans across the whole route – they would transport their goods between two commercial centres and would then sell them on to other merchants. The caravan cities of the Silk Road benefited both from the trading of these goods and from the taxes and customs duties levied upon merchants. Along with trade goods came new ideas: religions, medical knowledge, scientific and technological innovations all passed in both directions and the Silk Road became a great network of veins and arteries, carrying the life-blood of nations across the known world.

Silk Road commerce was driven by three basic factors: first, the obvious

desire for profit; second, a fascination with the exotic; and third, as a means to enhance the political power of a particular nation. All three issues will be discussed at length throughout this book. If anyone doubts that Silk Road commerce was truly global in nature, consider the following three items, each unearthed in distant corners of the world in extraordinary circumstances. An Indian ivory mirror handle from the first century AD, found in the ruins of Pompeii, an Egyptian Pharaoh mask found in the thirteenth-century grave of a Mongol woman at Genghis Khan's capital of Karakorum in Mongolia, and a seventh-or eighth-century bronze Buddha from Pakistan's Swat valley, found in a Viking grave at Helgö in Sweden, all reveal the extent to which the Silk Road disseminated its products.

As already mentioned, silk was the principal, but by no means the only, commodity. A search through a substantial part of the extant literature on the Silk Road reveals literally dozens of different commodities, and the following chart, which is by no means exhaustive, attempts to summarise the principal ones. There are also references throughout this book to the products of individual Silk Road cities, gleaned mainly from the writings of commentators of the time. Individual commodities are discussed in greater detail elsewhere in the book.

## **A SUMMARY OF TRADE GOODS FROM EAST AND WEST CARRIED BY LAND AND SEA**

### **Commodities from the East**

#### *From India:*

Household slaves, pets and arena animals, exotic furs, cashmere wool, raw and finished cotton (cotton plants have been cultivated in India for 4,000 years), spinach (probably mainly from Nepal), sandalwood and other exotic woods, palm-oil, cane-sugar and perfumes (aromatics), gems (rubies, sapphires and emeralds, although diamonds, surprisingly, were not prized by the Chinese).

#### *From China:*

Silk, skins, iron, mirrors, weapons, porcelain (first manufactured around the eighth century), lacquerware, nephrite jade (from Khotan), rhubarb, tea.

Paper, traditionally thought to have been invented by the court eunuch Cai Lun in 105.

Gunpowder, invented in China around the seventh century and first used by them for military purposes around the twelfth century. It reached Europe during the fourteenth century.

Medicines: ephedra (Chinese: mahuang – used for millennia in China to treat asthma and hay fever. Ephedrine – now synthesised – was originally made from ephedra), Epsom salts, elixirs for

immortality (which often shortened, rather than extended life), ginseng (the best was from Korea), snake bile (collected in southern China and Indochina) and seaweed (a diuretic), among many other examples.

*From Various Parts of Asia:*

Precious and semi-precious stones: including lapis lazuli (mined in Afghanistan), jadeite (from Burma), rock crystal, carnelians and other quartzes, rubies (from Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia), sapphires (from India, Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka).

Jewellery, ivory, tortoiseshell, rhinoceros horn, seashells and pearls.

Ornamental woods, gum resins and aromatics (camphor from China, Japan, Borneo and Indochina was highly coveted).

Silver and gold (especially from southern China, Tibet and Indochina, but also imported from many other parts of the world).

Spices (especially pepper, ginger, cardamom, turmeric, nutmeg and cloves, and, from India, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, cinnamon).

Cochineal and indigo, used for dyeing fabrics and cosmetics.

Minerals: sulphur (for elixirs, imported from Indonesia); realgar (or arsenic sulphide, found in many parts of the world – although the best comes from Hunan province in China – and used as an elixir to treat skin diseases and, so it was believed, to convert copper into gold).

Ceramics.

Horses (Central Asian breeds were especially prized in China) and camels.

Flowers, including peonies, roses, camellias and chrysanthemums and tulips (tulips from Central Asia and Turkey first arrived in Europe in the 1550s and were so coveted in seventeenth-century Holland that a single bulb could sell for 5,000 guilders, more than the price of a house!).

Alfalfa for animal feed, millet.

Human beings: acrobats, Central Asian jugglers and musicians, Central Asian grooms, dwarves, household slaves, South Sea Island pearl divers, Southeast Asian dancers, foreign guards.

*From Persia and the Countries of the Middle East:*

Incense (from southern Arabia), dates, pistachios, peaches, walnuts, Tyrian purple (from the *Murex trunculus* shellfish) and indigo for dyeing; frankincense and myrrh; storax (an aromatic resin), muslin cloth, wines, glassware, olive oil and silver vessels (especially the work of the Sasanian craftsmen of Persia).

**Commodities from the West**

Merchants on the land routes and Roman ships, crewed by men from many nations, conveyed: Wool and linen textiles, carpets, Baltic amber, Mediterranean coral, asbestos, bronze vessels, lamps, glass vessels and glass beads, wine and papyrus, huge quantities of coins and bullion, ambergris (from the sperm whale, used in the manufacture of perfume and collected along the African coast), entertainers, exotic animals and opium (opium poppies probably originated in the eastern Mediterranean and reached China in about the seventh century).

**Religions (Spread Along the Trade Routes in all Directions)**

Buddhism (arose in India and spread in both directions as far east as Japan and as far west as modern day Turkmenistan).

Islam (founded in the seventh century, it spread in all directions and now attracts a worldwide following of more than 1 billion devotees).

Christianity (arose in the eastern Mediterranean and spread throughout the Roman world. Nestorian Christianity spread eastwards after the expulsion of Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople, during the fifth century. It reached China by 635).

Manichaeism (developed in the Middle East during the third century and reached China by the seventh or eighth century).

Zoroastrianism (the state religion of Persia until the arrival of Islam in the seventh century, it had spread eastwards to China and India by the seventh or eighth century).

### **Technology and Innovations**

*Acquired by China from the Lands to the West:*

Harnesses, saddles and stirrups (from the steppe nomads), construction methods for bridges and mountain roads, knowledge of medicinal plants and poisons, cultivation of cotton and seafaring techniques.

*Acquired by the West from Asia:*

Principal Chinese Inventions:<sup>2</sup>

Square-pallet chain-pump

Rotary fan and rotary winnowing machine Piston-bellows

Draw-loom

Silk-handling machinery

Wheelbarrow

Sailing-carriage

Wagon-mill

Efficient harness for draught animals Crossbow

Kite

Deep drilling

Cast iron

Iron-chain suspension bridge Canal lock-gates

Nautical construction principles (including watertight compartments, aerodynamically efficient sails and fore-and-aft rigging) Stern-post rudder

Gunpowder

Magnetic compass

Paper

Printing (block)

Printing (movable type) Printing (metal movable type) Porcelain

Medical techniques (especially from Arab scholars such as Ibn Sina).

Science and mathematics – algebra, astronomy and the Arab numerals that we use in the West today.

The use of passports (a Mongol innovation, known as the *paizi* or *gerege*).

Military techniques and strategies.

Architectural styles and devices (the Persian invention of the squinch allowed the addition of a dome and led to the construction of many of the world's great buildings).

# CHAPTER ONE

## The Old Road Through Afghanistan to India

For centuries the wealth of India flowed along a network of highways across the entire sub-continent. Many of the towns along the way and the merchants that controlled the commerce that passed through them became rich. Towns like Jaiselmer in western Rajasthan grew out of the desert-like mirages. The inhabitants profited from pan-Asian trade and built grand palaces (*havelis*) for themselves from local sandstone.

The principal trade route from India passed through Taxila, through the Khyber Pass to Bamiyan and across the Hindu Kush to Balkh. From Balkh, the highway led east along the Wakhan Corridor and through the Pamirs to China, or north to Termez and onwards to Central Asia. Bamiyan, itself some 2,500 m above sea level, was the approximate halfway point of an arduous journey across the country. At the eastern end of this part of the Silk Road is the Khyber Pass, rising through the foothills of the Slueman Range from its starting point, about 16 km west of Peshawar. The 45 km long pass has provided access to India since the beginnings of recorded history ([Figure 1](#)).

The pass also contains the western terminus of the Grand Trunk Road, a highway built by the British on the site of an ancient route that traversed the whole Indian sub-continent as far as Calcutta. The modern crossing point into Afghanistan is at Torkham, a bustling frontier post enlivened by characters who seem to come straight from the pages of Kipling.

During the Taliban era Silk Road trade was almost non-existent and consisted mainly of emergency food supplies sent into the country, and the scrap metal from thousands of shattered vehicles being sent out. The irony of the present conflict is that, in the years since the Twin Towers were attacked, Silk Road

trade has revived – NATO vehicles now carry fuel and other supplies for US-led forces in Afghanistan and hundreds of lorries pass through Torkham in both directions each day.



**Figure 1**  
The Khyber Pass, Pakistan.

The road from Torkham into Afghanistan passes through Jalalabad, once the site of innumerable Buddhist shrines and a place for pilgrimage. The technique of working in stucco, a cheap and readily available substitute for the grey schist stone favoured by the sculptors of Gandhara, attained its zenith around the third century at Hadda, near Jalalabad. Hadda's numerous monasteries (*viharas*) were still active at the time of a visit by the Chinese pilgrim Fa Xian in around 400, but the city was ruined and desolate when Xuanzang passed through in 630 – wrecked by Hephthalite invaders. One of Hadda's monasteries, Tapa-i-Shotor, escaped the ravages of the Hephthalites and until only a few years ago still contained large stucco sculptures of the Buddha flanked by attendants, with influences from the classical world.<sup>1</sup> It did not survive the Taliban era, however, and today Tapa-i-Shotor consists of little more than a mound of earth and a few flakes of gold leaf.



**MAP 2**

The trade routes from India.

## Kabul

Kabul has been Afghanistan's capital for little more than 200 years but has been an important Silk Road entrepôt since at least as far back as the Kushan period (first century BC to fourth century AD). The old walls and the citadel (the Bala Hissar) date back to around the fifth century and, although they are much rebuilt and repaired, still present an impressive sight. Old guide-books about Afghanistan are now heart-rending to read. As late as 1977, Nancy Dupree wrote enthusiastically about the very features that drew early travellers to the city:

The city is ringed with mountains, gleaming emerald green in spring; glistening white in winter. Even in summer barrenness they have an ever-changing beauty, turning from deep purple to brilliant

pink under the rising and setting sun. Two craggy ranges crowned with ancient bastions divide the city and the Kabul River flows through a narrow pass between them to meander through the heart of the city. Travellers have written glowingly of Kabul for centuries and modern visitors continue to be captivated by its lively charm.

(N. H. Dupree, 1977)

There were periods of intense fighting for control of Kabul between 1992–6 and, at the end of it all, what remained was a travesty of the city she described (Figure 2).



**Figure 2**

Kabul, Afghanistan. August 2000.

After the fighting ended, large sections of Kabul lay in ruins and the monuments and grand buildings that once graced its streets were in large part no more. The National Museum, once home to some of the Silk Road's greatest treasures, stood wrecked and roofless, its contents looted or destroyed.<sup>2</sup> Above it all, on the slopes of a hill called Sher-Darwaza, the great Mughal emperor, Babur, lay in eternal repose in the gardens that he loved so much. After Babur's death in 1530 his remains were brought to Kabul from Agra in fulfilment of his instructions, and he was laid to rest in a simple tomb. The fighting of the 1990s did not spare the tomb or the gardens and its appearance in 2000 was a metaphor on the impermanence of kingship and power (Figure 3).

## Bamiyan

To the west of Kabul is the valley of Bamiyan, reached by two roads through the lower regions of the Hindu Kush, one passing through the Shibar Pass and the other via the Hajigak Pass. The Bamiyan valley sits on an ancient branch of the Silk Road that linked India with China. It flourished as a centre for trade and religious worship until 1221, when the area was attacked by the armies of Genghis Khan. Genghis' favourite grandson Mütügen was killed during the siege of Shahr-I-Zohak ('The Red City'), a fortress protecting the eastern entrance to the valley. In revenge Genghis ordered the complete destruction of the entire valley and the extirpation of every living creature. What remained was given the name Mobaliq ('accursed city'). Shahr-I-Zohak still lies wrecked and abandoned above the valley, as does the nearby citadel of Shar-I -Gholghola ('The City of Lamentations'), named for the screams of its inhabitants at the hands of the Mongols.



**Figure 3**

Babur: 'A ruler from whose brow shone the Light of God'.<sup>3</sup> The tomb of Babur (1483–1530), founder of the Mughal dynasty. Kabul, Afghanistan. August 2000.

*The marble was badly damaged by bullets and the roof of the pavilion that covered it seemed ready to collapse but the park and buildings have since been rebuilt and crowds of visitors have now returned.*

Two immense figures of Buddha, 55 m and 38 m in height, were hewn out of

the rock at Bamiyan. They followed closely the Gandhara ideal and were probably carved by the pilgrims who travelled through the region and whose cave-sanctuaries can still be seen cut into the cliffs. The Buddhas were carved into the rock face of the cliff in a somewhat crude fashion and then covered, first with a layer of mud and then with a thinner layer of stucco, moulded to create garment folds. The immense Buddha images at Binglingsi, Longmen and Yungang in China may well have been inspired by the Bamiyan figures, and the monk Xuanzang's description in about 630 captures the sense of awe with which they were regarded:



**Figure 4**

The Great Buddha, Bamiyan, Afghanistan, c. fifth century. Height 55 m. Photographed in August 2000. Destroyed by the Taliban in March 2001.

*This immense image is probably a depiction of Vairocana, the cosmic Buddha. The alcove above the head was decorated with murals, and small monastic cells, chapels and assembly halls are cut into the rock.*

To the north-east of the royal city there is a mountain, on the declivity of which is placed a stone figure of Buddha, erect, in height 140 or 150 feet. Its golden hues sparkle on every side, and its precious ornaments dazzle the eyes by their brightness [...] To the east of the convent there is a standing figure of Sâkya Buddha, made of metallic stone, in height 100 feet.

(Xuanzang, 1884)

During the 1990s the entire Bamiyan valley was the scene of ferocious fighting between the Taliban and opposition groups. The Buddhas were damaged during these years but were not finally destroyed until March 2001, when they were blown up by the Taliban rulers of Afghanistan. In August 2000, when these photographs were taken, the larger of the two had not sustained major structural damage even though the upper part of the head had been blackened by the application of burning tyres (Figure 4). By then, the paintings that graced the caves at Bamiyan had already all but disappeared. Only the large roundels above the head of the large Buddha – neglected and flaking though they were – still remained and gave an idea of how beautiful the site must once have appeared.

The decorative elements and composition of these wall paintings, and those that once adorned the walls of the sanctuaries, are more Persian than Hellenistic. They reveal the new influences introduced to the area by the Sasanian invasions of the third century. Scholars have termed this new style of art ‘Irano-Buddhist’ or ‘Indo-Sasanian’. It reveals itself in the costumes and the decorative motifs of the Bamiyan paintings: *apsaras* (celestial nymphs) with flowing ribbons, jewelled diadems containing crescents and spheres, birds with strings of pearls in their beaks, and boar’s head medallions recall the Sasanian style but the faces of the figures are Indian. The paintings at Bamiyan are the antecedents of a style and technique found all over Central Asia. The pigments used at Bamiyan were mostly produced locally: ochre, sienna and lapis lazuli were the most popular, although imported indigo was also widely used. Wall surfaces were treated with a layer of clay mixed with vegetable fibres that was then coated with gypsum or plaster of Paris. Paint was then applied with a binding of animal glue.

The smaller of the two Buddhas, a slightly earlier creation dating to around the third century, stood about 400 m to the east and even by August 2000 had fared much worse than its companion. Even before the Taliban destroyed it, most of the local people’s enmity has been directed at this smaller image. There

was an erroneous belief among them that the smaller image was female – a ‘lady Buddha’ as it were – and they were offended by its thin, clinging robes.

The picture is just as bleak in the Kakrak valley, just to the east. In 2000 a 6.5 m high Buddha still stood in a niche on the hillside, even though the paintings that once graced the caves had already gone; but this image, too, is now no more.

Through the ages, descriptions of the Buddhas of Bamiyan have ranged from the adulatory to the dismissive. Most, it must be said, are in the same vein as the awe-struck words of Xuanzang, quoted earlier. A number of observers were, however, less than impressed by the syncretic style that the Buddhas represented, and in the interests of fairness their views should be included here. The indefatigable Robert Byron saw them in the 1930s and his observations are wonderfully vituperative:

Neither has any artistic value. But one could bear that; it is their negation of sense, the lack of any pride in their monstrous flaccid bulk that sickens [...] A lot of monastic navvies were given picks and told to copy some frightful semi-Hellenistic image from India or China. The result has not even the dignity of labour.

(Robert Byron, 1937)

But Byron was wrong, of course, and the two old giants of Bamiyan – for the 1,500 years that they survived – ranked among the great artistic creations of the earth.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Silk Road Sites in Southern Central Asia

Merchants did not favour the branch of the Silk Road that led westwards from Kashgar, through the Wakhan Corridor and over the Pamirs to Afghanistan. Marco Polo followed the route during the thirteenth century but travellers found little in the way of food or water in the high mountain-passes and were vulnerable to attacks by bandits. Those that did brave the journey arrived, at length, in the old kingdom of Bactria with its capital at Balkh (Bactra).

Beyond Bamiyan, where the great Buddhas stood until the Taliban wrecked them in 2001, there is a road north to Doshi, the point at which it joins the main highway to Balkh. Balkh, the place the Arabs called ‘Mother of Cities’, was once one of the greatest commercial centres of the entire Silk Road. All roads to Bamiyan and beyond as far as Doshi are still unpaved and are disintegrating from decades of neglect. It is still possible to see caravans of camels struggling along these byways and it is difficult to believe that very much has changed since Xuanzang’s day ([Figure 5](#)).

There are many trading towns, both large and small, on the main highway from Doshi to Balkh. All have attained differing degrees of importance at various stages in history and many suffered destruction at the hands of the Mongols. The most important of them all is Mazar-e-Sharif, once little more than a village but now capital of Balkh province. The name of the town (meaning ‘tomb of the saint’) is a reference to the final resting place of Ali (c.600–61), son-in-law of the Prophet and the fourth Caliph of Islam. Ali actually died at Kufa, Iraq, in 661, but his followers, fearing that his remains would be desecrated by his enemies, placed them on the back of a white camel that was allowed to wander off into the desert. The camel eventually collapsed

from exhaustion and Ali's body was interred at a spot that lay undiscovered until the twelfth century, when its whereabouts were revealed to a mullah in a dream. Sanjar, the greatest of the Seljuk sultans, built a shrine on the spot, in what became the city of Mazar-e-Sharif. The shrine was destroyed by Genghis Khan but was rebuilt by the Timurids in the fifteenth century. Ali's shrine is venerated by Muslims, especially the Shi'a who regard him as the only true successor to the Prophet. Mazar-e-Sharif is only a short distance from Balkh and, after the identification of Ali's final resting place, it gradually replaced it as the regional capital.



**Figure 5**  
A camel caravan on the road to Bamiyan, Afghanistan.

### **FA XIAN, XUANZANG AND BUDDHISM**

A branch of the great Silk Road ran over the Karakorum Range to the Gandhara kingdom of the Kushans and on to India. The arrival of the Buddhist faith in China is one of many instances of the passage of ideas (one of the Silk Road's most important commodities) along the ancient routes. After the downfall of the Han dynasty in 220, Buddhism spread more rapidly through China. It was not until the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534), however, that Buddhism was adopted as the state religion, and even then it was mainly for reasons of political expediency. The Northern Wei also encouraged the acquisition and translation of Buddhist texts from India. They brought the celebrated monk Kumarajiva (343–413) to the capital at Datong in Shanxi province. Kumarajiva – son of an Indian father and a princess from Kuqa – translated some 300 Mahayana Buddhist texts from Sanskrit into Chinese and

expounded the doctrines of the new faith. Many of the monks who made the hazardous journey to India are unknown to history but two – Fa Xian (337–422) and Xuanzang (600–64) – have left records of their travels.

The first of the many Chinese pilgrims to journey to India and return safely to China was Fa Xian (337–422). In 399 he embarked on a 15-year journey, travelling outward through Khotan and across the Himalayas to India. He travelled to at least 30 kingdoms – studying Buddhism under the great Indian teachers of the day at Benares, at the Gandhara capital of Taxila, and in Ceylon. He remained in Ceylon for two years before attempting a return to China by sea. During the journey he was shipwrecked on the island of Java and was forced to continue his journey aboard a different vessel. When he returned to China in 414 he devoted himself to translating into Chinese the Buddhist sutras that he had acquired during his journey. The record of his travels, *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms* (1886), is an invaluable source of information about the geography and customs of some of the ancient kingdoms of the Silk Road and is referred to on many occasions in this book. His contribution to the growth of Buddhism in China can also not be overstated.

The celebrated Chinese monk Xuanzang, perhaps the most accomplished of all of the Silk Road's many travellers, set out in 629 from the Tang dynasty capital of Xian. His departure was contrary to the precise instructions of Emperor Taizong (r.626–49), and his intention, like that of Fa Xian before him, was to obtain Buddhist sutras from India. A number of modern historians have retraced his journey, involving more than 15,000 km and 16 years of the most arduous travel imaginable. His journey took him along the northern Silk Road to Turfan and Kuqa; then across the Tianshan Mountains to Tashkent, Samarkand and Bactria; over the Hindu Kush to the Gandhara kingdom; on a vast circuit of India; and finally back to China through the Pamirs and along the southern Silk Road.

On his return to China, the clandestine nature of his departure was forgotten and both the Emperor and the population of Changan fêted him. The Great Goose Pagoda in Xian was built to house the 657 Mahayana and Hinayana texts and the relics that he brought back, and he continued to work for the remainder of his life – translating some 1,300 volumes of sutras into Chinese. Seven Buddha images that he carried with him were among the relics and may have provided the inspiration for the Chinese Buddhist sculpture of the age. The record of his journey, *Buddhist Records of the Western World (Si-yu-ki)* (1884) is, like Fa Xian's volume, an immensely important source of information about the countries of the Silk Road.

## Balkh

After Akcha, the colour of the landscape changed from lead to aluminium, pallid and deathly, as if the sun had been sucking away its gaiety for thousands and thousands of years; for this now was the plain of Balkh, and Balkh they say is the oldest city in the world.

(Robert Byron, 1937)

Balkh was already 1,000 years old when it fell to the armies of Alexander the Great in June of 329 BC. He married a local beauty, the legendary Roxane (or Roxana), daughter of a Sogdian ruler named Oxyartes. Balkh was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Bactria, comprising the land to the north of the Hindu Kush and south of the Hissar Mountains. The entire area, known to the Greeks as the 'land of a thousand cities', is littered with archeological remains and was once home to a powerful empire. The city itself sits on a fertile plain, nourished by the waters of the Amu Darya (Oxus). It owed its prosperity to the fact that it straddled a lattice of trade routes and also to the rich mineral resources of the surrounding area. Gold, silver and rubies were mined in the locality and in the hills of the Badakshan to the east was the only source of lapis lazuli known to the ancient world. One of the Silk Road's many strands led south-westwards from Balkh to Herat and on to Persia, while another route crossed the Amu Darya (Oxus) to the north to reach Termez. There were several routes from Termez: one of them headed west across the Karakum ('Black Sands') Desert to Merv, where it bifurcated, reaching the Parthian capital of Nisa via Ashkabad or passing through Sarakhs (Saraghs) to arrive at Masshad in Iran. There was also a road to the north-east from Termez to Tashkent (Chach) passing through Dushanbe, a Soviet-era town built on the site of an ancient settlement. The third route passed north through Iron Gate Pass ([Figure 10](#)) and then either continued north-west through Karshi to Bukhara, or veered off to the north-east to Samarkand and on to Tashkent. The choice of routes depended, of course, on an individual traveller's final destination but it was also influenced by the seasons and by whether there were brigands or civil disorder along the way.



**MAP 3**

Trade routes and principal sites of Central Asia.



**Figure 6**

The mud walls of the Bala Hissar (Fort) at Balkh, northern Afghanistan.

*Mostly Timurid period (1370–1506), but built on early, partly Kushan era, foundations. The Timurids extended the walls to a circumference of about 10 km and, in places, they still stand 20 m high.*

There was also a great road to the south and south-east from Balkh, passing over the Hindu Kush through Bamiyan to the Khyber Pass. From the Khyber Pass ran what came to be known as the Grand Trunk Road, a long arterial

highway that linked to a vast network of trade routes across the entire Indian sub-continent.

Inspired by the teachings of Buddhism, the Kushans built great temples around Balkh and the remains of two Buddhist structures still stand to the south of the walls: Top-I-Rustam, the site of a large stupa containing a Buddha-relic, and Takht-I-Rustam, atop which once stood a large monastery that counted the Buddha's washing-basin among its possessions. Later structures – like the fifth-century Dilberjin Kazan in the north-west of the site – reveal that some of the inhabitants were also followers of Hinduism. A splendid painting discovered at Dilberjin depicts Shiva and Parvati with the bull, Nandi. Balkh is one of the proposed birthplaces of Zoroaster and the city was a centre for Zoroastrianism during the Achaemenid and Greco-Bactrian periods. The religion seems to have been followed by some of Balkh's populace right up until the Arab conquest of the area at the end of the seventh century. During the fourth century Balkh was looted by a Sasanian army and the northern part of the city fell into disuse and became a burial ground. The city did not perish, however – it was still a thriving commercial and religious centre when Xuanzang visited in 630. Today, 100 Buddhist monasteries and about 3,000 monks are still to be found in the area.



**Figure 7**

Masjed-I-Hajji Piyada (Masjed-I-No Gumbad – ‘the mosque with nine domes’) at Balkh, northern Afghanistan.

*This mosque, built of baked brick, is said to be the oldest in Afghanistan (mid-ninth century). The intricate stucco decoration on the arches resembles that of Samarra, 125 km north of Baghdad on the Tigris, the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate during the second half of the ninth century. The columns have their antecedents in the Zoroastrian temples of Sasanian times (see also [Figure 23](#), the Magok-I-Attari). The Masjed-I-No Gumbad is in desperate need of shoring up to prevent it from collapse and was listed on the World Monuments Fund’s 2006 watch list of 100 Most Endangered Sites.*

Balkh was again wrecked during the Arab conquests of the late seventh century – not long after Xuanzang’s visit – but its fortunes had revived by the tenth century, a pattern of death and rebirth that was to be repeated throughout the city’s history. According to Arab accounts of the medieval period, Balkh had been destroyed and rebuilt more than 20 times by the sixteenth century. By the tenth century it was enjoying a period of renewed prosperity thanks to

continuing trade with India and onwards commerce with cities to the east and west. Balkh became a centre for Islamic scholarship and was revered by Arab geographers who called it ‘mother of cities’, ‘the dome of Islam’ and ‘paradise on earth’. By the ninth century there were said to be 40 mosques in the city, although today only one has survived ([Figure 7](#)).

One of Balkh’s most celebrated sons was the great Sufi poet Mawlana Jalaluddin Balkhi (1207–73), known by the familiar name of Rumi. Rumi was born in Balkh but left the city in about 1218 with his parents, ahead of the Mongol advance. After a decade or so of wandering he finally settled in the Turkish city of Konya in Anatolia, then the capital of the Seljuk Sultanate of Rum (from where he derives his name). Rumi’s 26,000-verse epic *Mathnavi* is considered by many scholars to be the greatest of all Persian poems. After his death Rumi’s devotees formed a sect called ‘Mawlawiyah’, better known in the West as the Whirling Dervishes. His poems have a sparkling directness that speaks down through the ages:

I tried to find Him on the Christian cross, but He  
was not there; I went to the Temple of the  
Hindus and to the old pagodas, but I could not  
find a trace of Him anywhere.

I searched on the mountains and in the valleys  
but neither in the heights nor in the depths was I  
able to find Him. I went to the Ka’bah in Mecca,  
but He was not there either.

I questioned the scholars and philosophers but  
He was beyond their understanding.

I then looked into my heart and it was there  
where He dwelled that I saw Him; He was  
nowhere else to be found.

(Mawlana Jalaluddin Balkhi, or Rumi (1207–73), *Allah*. Translated by Coleman Barks)

Balkh continued to thrive until 1221 when it was comprehensively flattened by the armies of Genghis Khan. A contemporary account describes what happened after the city fell to the Mongols:

[Genghis Khan] commanded that the population of Balkh, great and small, few and many, both men and women should be driven out onto the plain and divided up according to their usual custom into hundreds and thousands to be put to the sword; and that not a trace should be left of fresh or dry [...] And they cast fire into the garden of the city and devoted their whole attention to the destruction of

the outworks and walls, and mansions and palaces.

(Ata-Malik Juvaini, *The History of the World Conqueror*. Quoted in Mukhtarov, 1993)

Marco Polo visited Balkh later in the thirteenth century and has left a vivid description of a once-great city, laid waste by Genghis:

We shall now speak of another named Balach; a large and magnificent city. It was formerly still more considerable, but has sustained much injury from the Tartars, who in their frequent attacks have partly demolished its buildings. It contained many palaces constructed of marble, and spacious squares, still visible, although in a ruinous state.

(From *The Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian*. Translated by William Marsden, in Polo, 1948)

When the Arab traveller Ibn Battuta (1304–77) passed through Balkh during the first half of the fourteenth century it was still a desolate ruin:

We crossed the river Oxus into the land of Khurasan and after a day and a half's march through a sandy uninhabited waste reached Balkh. It is an utter ruin and uninhabited, but anyone seeing it would think it inhabited on account of the solidity of its construction. The accursed Tinkiz [Genghis] destroyed this city and demolished about a third of its mosque on account of a treasure which he was told lay under one of its columns.

(From *Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325–1354*. Translated by H. A. R. Gibb, in Ibn Battuta, 1929)

Under the Timurids the city rose, once again, from its ashes. It was rebuilt during the 1360s by Amir Husayn, a companion of Timur, the city walls extended to a circumference of 10 km, and the citadel reconstructed. By this time the Silk Road was in decline and the city's fortunes came to depend on whichever invader currently held sway. A cycle of destruction and rejuvenation continued until the nineteenth century, when the city's role as a regional capital was usurped by the town of Mazar-e-Sharif. In 1852–3 Balkh was abandoned and became a deserted ruin, inhabited by ghosts.

The settlements constructed at Balkh, Termez, Dalverzin-tepe and elsewhere by the Kushans were on old Greco-Bactrian foundations. These sites were generally laid out in a rectangular form, enclosed by walls of sun-dried brick or earth up to 20 m in height and surrounded by a moat. At each corner were towers from which the town's defenders could launch arrows.

## **Termez and its Associated Sites**

The plain façades of Kushan cities were in contrast to their interiors. Interior walls were decorated with murals of court life, religious scenes and fabulous animals. Old Termez was built on a natural rise on the right bank of the Amu Darya (Oxus) River, occupying a site of more than 400 hectares to the south-west of today's city. Although there are remains dating back to the first millennium BC, Termez enjoyed its heyday during the Greco-Bactrian and Kushan periods. The ruins of a customs house and a guesthouse suggest that trade was already being conducted by the beginning of the Christian era. The Kushans called Termez 'Tarmita' and, when the Buddhist faith came to dominate the region during the first and second centuries AD, they erected a large number of monasteries and stupas in and around the city. The greatest of these were the large complex of caves at Kara-tepe, just to the north-west of old Termez, and the monastery of Fayaz-tepe to the north. Kara-tepe ('Black Hill') now sits in the sensitive border zone between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, but in its day, particularly during the second and third centuries, it flourished as a centre for Buddhist learning. More than 25 caves were cut into the sides of three hills at the site, and free-standing, mud-brick structures were also erected. Generations of travellers have left graffiti on the cave walls, with inscriptions in many of the languages of the Silk Road.

Fayaz-tepe occupies an equally colourful location beneath a military radar installation. The complex comprises a Buddhist temple and monastery, built around the time of Christ, and a small stupa of mud-brick. A limestone relief of a Buddha seated beneath a bodhi tree is the most celebrated of Fayaz-tepe's many treasures ([Figure 8](#)).



**Figure 8**

Limestone relief depicting Buddha Sakyamuni seated beneath the bodhi tree, flanked by two attendant monks. Bactria, Kushan period, first to second century AD. Height 75 cm, width 62.5 cm. From Fayaz-tepe, southern Uzbekistan.

*This relief, in a style strongly reminiscent of Gandhara, depicts the Buddha shortly before the moment of his enlightenment as he meditates beneath the bodhi tree at Bodghaya, Bihar State, India. The Corinthian columns at each side are a flourish from the Classical world.*

A large stupa, about 16 m tall and built of mud and terracotta bricks, still stands to the east of old Termez. The ancient structure is known as the 'Bastion of Zurmal' and dates to the Bactrian (Kushan) period (first to third century AD). It is fragile and near to collapse but still dominates the surrounding area.

## **Airtam**

Airtam comprises a group of Buddhist monuments, situated about 18 km east of Termez on the bank of the Amu Darya. This religious centre was constructed during the Kushan period and extended for almost 3 km along the riverbank. The lower half of a large limestone relief from Airtam consists of the legs of a pair of male and female rulers or deities, with a dedicatory inscription on the base. Fragments of another celebrated frieze were found in the Amu Darya (Oxus) in 1932 and now reside in the Hermitage in St Petersburg. They show half-figures of three celestial female figures separated by acanthus leaves and holding musical instruments. The figures are executed in a Hellenistic style but their physiognomy is Asiatic, not unlike the sculpture of Palmyra. Several more fragments of the same frieze were found a year later in the remains of a Buddhist sanctuary on the nearby riverbank. The middle figure plays a type of lute, one of the earliest known depictions of a stringed instrument.

About 175 km north-east of Termez is the city of Denau. The road to Denau follows the course of the Surkhan Darya River, a tributary of the Amu Darya (Oxus), and then veers east towards the modern Tajik capital of Dushanbe. North and south of Denau are the Kushan cities of Khalchayan – where a palace containing polychromed sculpted clay friezes was discovered – and Dalverzin-tepe. Both were extensively excavated by Soviet archeologists during the 1960s and 1970s.

## **Khalchayan and Dalverzin-tepe**

Khalchayan, on the right bank of the Surkhan Darya River, is thought to be one of the earliest Kushan settlements, although its moated fortress dates back even further – to the Greco-Bactrian era of the second or third century BC. Soviet archeologists discovered the remains of a palace at Khalchayan, thought to have been built around the first century BC by the Geraï clan. The Geraï are believed to have been one of the Yuezhi tribes who laid the foundations of the Kushan Empire that emerged during the reign of Kujula Kadphises (c.30–80). The clan appear to have come to use the palace as their dynastic temple. It was in ruins by the end of the third century AD but fragments of the murals and clay reliefs that adorned its walls still exist. The clay sculptures are of gods and princes – heroic,

life-sized portraits of men in three-quarters or half relief. The central relief contains a king and queen seated upon a throne while to one side a battle rages with archers on horseback firing backwards – a motif found all along the Silk Road and known as the ‘Parthian Shot’. Another frieze contains children with garlands, a borrowing from the Hellenistic world also seen in the art of Gandhara. There is an overwhelming sense of deep inner spirituality to the sculptures and, sometimes, an air of suffering too. Among the life-size Khalchayan sculptures in the Institute of Fine Arts, Tashkent, are a painted clay head of a warrior wearing a helmet and a head of a deity or adorant with closed eyes. Both date from the first century BC to first century AD of the Kushan period.

The second major settlement in the Denau area, Dalverzin-tepe, was also built during the Greco-Bactrian period but enjoyed its heyday during the first to the third centuries of the Kushan era. Dalverzin-tepe was a large fortified city – almost certainly a northern capital of the Kushans – and was found to contain mansions for the rich and temples for Buddhists, Zoroastrians and local deities. A 36-kg hoard of gold unearthed in 1972 included beautifully inlaid necklaces, bracelets, earrings and buckles. The hoard also contained small unworked ingots stamped with their weights in Kharosthi script and some with dedicatory references to their intended recipients. The gold was hurriedly forced into a crudely made vessel with a narrow neck, causing many of the pieces to be damaged. Like so many of the Silk Road’s cities, Dalverzin-tepe’s glory-days were soon at an end. The Sasanians swept through sometime during the latter half of the third century AD and flattened the town. The ruins were patched up and inhabited until about the seventh century, with the unused parts utilised, as at Balkh, as a necropolis.

Hundreds of Kushan-era clay sculptures were found in two Buddhist temples at Dalverzin-tepe and some are truly spectacular. At Temple 1, painted clay figures of what appear to be royal donors were found. They are stylistically related to Gandhara sculptures from further south but are uniquely Central Asian in style ([Figure 9](#)).

One of the great finds in Temple 2 (DT-25) at Dalverzin-tepe was a massive painted clay figure of a jewelled *bodhisattva*. *Sans* feet, the sculpture still reaches a height of 1.7 m. It dates to around the third century AD of the Kushan

period and also now resides in the Institute of Fine Arts, Tashkent. This extraordinary sculpture clearly relates to the Gandhara sculptures produced by the Kushans further to the south, but is more extensively decorated than typical pieces from Hadda or other sites. It does, however, bear a strong resemblance to some works of art from the great Silk Road sites of Xinjiang. It represents a style of art that came to be replicated at many sites in eastern Central Asia. A further example of the style can be seen in the clay reliefs of Tumshuq (Toqquz-Sarai) – see the companion volume to this book, *The Silk Road – China and the Karakorum Highway: A Travel Companion*. From the same temple comes a heroic figure of a *bodhisattva*, also strongly reminiscent of Gandhara sculpture, with a recessed *urna* (third eye) on his forehead that was found to contain fruit stones and a gold button, all sealed in place with gypsum.



**Figure 9**

Painted clay head of a princely donor wearing a conical hat. Bactria, Kushan period, first to second century AD. Height 49.5 cm. Unearthed from the 'King's Hall', Temple 1, Dalverzin-tepe, southern Uzbekistan. *A beautifully modelled figure of a Buddhist donor, painted in black and red pigments, was also recovered from Temple 1.*

Dalverzin-tepe's murals, painted on clay, are more friable and have therefore survived only as fragments. The most striking is a mysterious image of an as yet unexplained temple ritual – perhaps a baptismal or fertility rite. The 27 cm x 26 cm mural fragment depicts a priest holding aloft a child. Dating to around the first century AD of the Kushan period, it too can be seen in the Institute of Fine Arts, Tashkent.

Among the small objects found at Dalverzin-tepe are the gold hoard described above and an ivory comb depicting ladies at their *toilette*. It is unquestionably of Indian origin and a testament to the high level of Silk Road trade between the Kushans and their southern neighbours. This comb is not as finely made as the ivory casket discovered at Begram, to the north of Kabul, but has a similar theme. The reverse of the comb shows figures on an elephant.



**Figure 10**

The Gateway to Sogdiana – Iron Gate Pass, the Buzgala Defile, near Derbent, Uzbekistan.

Successive empires fought to keep the north–south trade routes open. The road north from Bactria led over the Hissar Mountains of Tajikistan, through the Iron Gate Pass, into the land of the Sogdians ([Figure 10](#)). Iron Gate Pass is situated 3 km west of Derbent in modern Uzbekistan and was described by the monk Xuanzang. There may well have been a colossal gate there, perhaps erected by the Kushans to protect their empire from invasion, though nothing remains of it today.

The routes north from the Iron Gate Pass are discussed in detail in [Chapter 8](#).

## CHAPTER THREE

# The Coming of Islam to Central Asia

After the Muslim defeat of the Sasanian Empire in 651, Arab armies sought to bring Islam to the land beyond the Oxus, Transoxiana, known to them as *Mawana 'an nahr* ('what is beyond the river'). That same year, an Arab army from Basra (in Mesopotamia in today's Iraq) succeeded in taking the great oasis city of Merv (Mary, in modern Turkmenistan). During the early years the Arabs lacked a power base and were compelled to rule through the nobles and administrators of the former Sasanian regime, but by the end of the century some 50,000 families from Kufa and Basra are said to have joined their soldier husbands in Merv and the city became the base for the Muslim conquest of Central Asia. During the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750) and the early part of the Abbasid Caliphate (749–1258), Merv was the capital of the eastern Islamic territories. This state of affairs prevailed until the transfer of the capital to Nishapur during the Tahirid dynasty (821–73).

The garrison at Merv was strengthened in 676 by the arrival of an additional 4,000 men from Basra, among them Qutham ibn al-Abbas, a cousin of the Prophet. The men of Basra and Kufa rarely collaborated and the conquest of Central Asia progressed slowly as a result. The first military forays across the Oxus began in 673, led by Ubaidallah ibn Ziyad, governor of Khurasan – the eastern part of the former Sasanian Empire. Termez was taken in 676 and attacks were launched against the great caravan cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, then ruled by the Khorezm dynasty. General Qutaiba ibn Muslim, appointed governor of Khurasan in 704, consolidated Arab control of the region. Bukhara fell to the Arabs in 709, followed by Samarkand in 712. Qutaiba is said to have systematically killed off all the scholars of Khorezm in an attempt to erase the country's culture. He established a large Arab garrison at Samarkand and, during the period 713–14, rampaged through Chach (Tashkent), Khujand (Khodjent)

and Ferghana. Qutaiba swept all before him, brushing aside all opposition including attempts by surviving relatives of the last Sasanian ruler, Yazdegerd III, to raise an army against him and to elicit Chinese support. Qutaiba's advance was finally checked when news reached him in 714 that his patron Hajjaj ibn Yusuf, governor of Iraq and the eastern provinces, had died. He campaigned through Ferghana for a further year until, in 715, the Caliph Walid died and Qutaiba was recalled to Merv. He was then killed; probably on the orders of the new caliph, Sulaiman – Qutaiba's bitter enemy – and the momentum of the Arabs' advance was quickly lost. In the years after Qutaiba's death the Arab tribes of Khurasan were riven by internal disputes and few territorial gains were made. Agents of the Abbasids worked tirelessly to achieve the overthrow of the Umayyad Caliphate and, north of the Syr Darya (Jaxartes) River, the Türgesh Turks rallied to the cause of the beleaguered Sogdian armies who had fled to the Ferghana valley in 721. In 724 the Türgesh Turks heavily defeated a Muslim expeditionary force sent into the Ferghana valley. Between 728–38 the Turks controlled almost all of the territory north of the Amu Darya (Oxus) and at times it appeared that the Arabs might be completely ousted from Transoxiana. A cache of documents found by Soviet archeologists at Mount Mugh, northern Tajikistan, in 1933, provide a remarkable record of the tumultuous years that followed the death of Qutaiba. The Sogdian chieftain Divastich, last ruler of Penjikent, fled to the mountain citadel of Mugh after the fall of Penjikent to the Arabs. He was captured at Mugh in 722, and executed, but his archive survived and provides an invaluable source of information about the economic and social conditions of Sogdiana.

The death of the Türgesh Khagan Su-lu brought about the disintegration of the Turks' state. With the threat to their rule removed, the Arabs were able to introduce a process of reconciliation and pacification to Central Asia. The last Umayyad governor, Nasr ibn Sayyar, succeeded in 737 and pursued a strategy of amnesty and tax reform among his subjects (*mawali*) and among the Sogdian landowners. Many people voluntarily converted to Islam and Sogdian merchants financed many of the Arabs' expeditions.

The rise of Islam had a profound effect on trade along the Silk Road. By 751 its followers had conquered Byzantine Syria, the whole of North Africa, Sasanian Persia and much of Central Asia. The power of Islam held sway from

Spain to the Ferghana valley, Arab traders controlled both maritime and land routes and Moslem Persia developed a domestic silk industry that rivalled China's. Richard Foltz (1999) outlines three levels at which Islam spread throughout Central Asia: at the political level (as an instrument of foreign policy); at the commercial level (followers and converts enjoyed greater opportunities for trade); and at the level of assimilation (successive generations would forget the ways of the past).

During the first half of the eighth century, the Tang government of China attempted to regain control of the lucrative trade routes across Central Asia. Arab and Chinese armies finally clashed in July 751 at the River Talas in modern Kazakhstan. The Tang army, led by the gifted Korean general Gao Xianzhi, fought for five days but was eventually defeated by the Arab troops of Ziyad ibn-Salih. Many Chinese were captured and sent to work in Samarkand and Damascus where they taught skills to the native craftsmen, including the techniques of paper and silk manufacture. Few of them ever made it back to China although a man named Du Huan is said to have done so in 762 and written an account of his adventures. A more enduring consequence of the battle was that Chinese control of Central Asia was lost for the next 1,000 years. Although the Arabs did not pursue the fleeing Chinese troops and the battle marked the limit of their territorial expansion, they remained the dominant force in Silk Road trade until the coming of the Mongols in the early thirteenth century.

The arrival in Khurasan of the Abbasid missionary Abu Muslim in 748 was the catalyst for a revolt against Umayyad rule. In 750 the Umayyad dynasty came to an end and the capital of the caliphate was moved from Damascus to Baghdad. The demise of the Umayyad Caliphate was coupled with the ascent of Persian culture and language in Central Asia. The old languages and cultures of Bactria, Khorezm and Sogdiana<sup>1</sup> disappeared from the pages of history and were replaced by all things Persian – a revival of traditions from the pre-Islamic era. The reasons for the 'Persianisation' of Central Asia are complex but include the fact that the merchants there were prepared to embrace Islam and accept foreign rule so long as the trade routes and the commerce they conducted along them were safeguarded. Persian quickly became the language of choice among the Arab soldiers and Sogdian traders of Central Asia. The large number of slaves, sent west to work across the Abbasid Empire, brought Persian ideas with them if

they managed to return home, and refugees from the old Sasanian regime also encouraged the spread of the language in Central Asia.

This period of the Abbasid Caliphate (749–1258) gave rise to many technological and cultural developments, many of which reached the West via the Silk Road. One process, learned from captured Chinese craftsmen at the Battle of Talas in 751, was that of paper-making, though other innovations were made by local men. One of the most celebrated of these men was Mohammed ibn Musa al-Khorezmi (d. c.845), a talented mathematician whose name gave us the word ‘algorithm’. His treatise on so-called ‘Arabic’ numerals led to the spread of the system of numbers we use today. The word ‘algebra’ is derived from the title of another of al-Khorezmi’s works: *al-gabr* or *al-gebr*, originally meant ‘to reset’ bones but subsequently adapted to mean the ‘setting’ of a mathematical equation.

The Arabs saw no contradiction between the process of trade and the ideal of a restrained lifestyle encouraged by Islam. Muhammad himself was a merchant in the city of Mecca, a town through which caravans had passed and conducted trade for centuries. There are a number of remarks ascribed to the Prophet (known as *hadiths*), which place merchants at the very highest rung of society: The honest, truthful Muslim merchant will stand with the martyrs on the Day of Judgement.

[...]

I commend the merchants to you, for they are couriers of the horizons and God’s trusted servants on earth.

(Quoted in Liu, 1996)

If merchants of all types were highly regarded in the Islamic world, those who traded in textiles – especially silk – were the most esteemed of all. In the Qur’an there are several references to silk, equating the wearing of the precious material with entry into Paradise: As for those that have faith and do good works, God will admit them to gardens watered by running streams. They shall be decked with bracelets of gold and of pearls, and arrayed in garments of silk.

(From *The Qur’an*, XXII: 22–4. Translated by N. J. Dawood, in *The Koran*, 1999) The Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad presided over a thriving metropolis, visited by traders from the remotest corners of the world. Palace and government workshops produced textiles known as *tiraz*, a Persian word meaning

‘embroidery’. *Tiraz* textiles were embroidered with an inscription in silk thread, usually a laudatory message referring to the name, accomplishments and regnal dates of the caliph. The *tiraz* system spread throughout the Islamic world, including Sicily and Spain, and ensured that large quantities of high quality textiles were produced. It continued well into the thirteenth century but, after the central control of the caliphate began to weaken, local rulers took over the *tiraz* workshops and produced textiles that celebrated their own achievements rather than those of the caliph’s (see the ‘St Josse silk’, described on p. 40).

In addition to *tiraz* textiles, the ruling classes of the Abbasid Empire especially prized silk robes and carpets, both locally made and imported. A Byzantine ambassador to Baghdad in 917 described the palace of the caliph, al-Muktadir, as containing 38,000 curtains – including 12,000 of gold brocade – and 22,000 carpets. A forebear of al-Muktadir, the mighty Harun Al Rashid (r.786–809) left behind an enormous treasury, the contents of which were recorded at the time of his death (see box below). The contents, like the treasures contained in the Shoso-in repository of the Japanese emperor Shomu, are a cornucopia of goods from the countries of the Silk Road.<sup>2</sup> Harun Al Rashid was a man who loved silk:

4,000 embroidered robes  
4,000 silk cloaks, lined with sable, mink and other furs 10,000 shirts and shifts  
10,000 caftans  
2,000 drawers of various kinds 4,000 turbans  
1,000 hoods  
1,000 capes of various kinds 5,000 kerchiefs of different kinds 500 (pieces of) velvet  
100,000 *mithqals* of musk<sup>3</sup>  
100,000 *mithqals* of ambergris<sup>4</sup>  
1,000 baskets of Indian aloes 1,000 precious china vessels Many kinds of perfume  
Jewels valued by the jewellers at four million dinars 500,000 dinars 1,000 jewelled rings  
1,000 Armenian carpets  
4,000 curtains  
5,000 cushions  
5,000 pillows (*mikhadda*) 1,500 silk carpets  
100 silk rugs  
1,000 silk cushions and pillows 300 Maysani carpets  
1,000 Darabjirdi carpets  
1,000 cushions with silk brocade 1,000 inscribed silk cushions 1,000 silk curtains  
300 silk brocade curtains  
500 Tabari carpets  
1,000 Tabari cushions  
1,000 pillows (*mirfade*) 1,000 pillows (*mikhadda*) 1,000 washbasins

1,000 ewers  
 300 stoves  
 1,000 candlesticks  
 2,000 brass objects of various kinds 1,000 belts  
 10,000 decorated swords  
 50,000 swords for the guards and pages (*ghulam*) 150,000 lances  
 100,000 bows  
 1,000 special suits of armour 50,000 common suits of armour 10,000 helmets  
 20,000 breast-plates  
 150,000 shields  
 4,000 special saddles  
 30,000 common saddles  
 4,000 pairs of half-boots, most of them lined with sable, mink and other kinds of fur, with a knife and a kerchief in each half-boot 4,000 pairs of socks  
 4,000 small tents with their appurtenances 150 marquees.

(Ibn al Zubayr. Quoted in Liu, 1996)

The *hadiths* criticise the wearing of silk but the Qur'an does not and both Harun Al Rashid and his wife, Zubaida, were inordinately fond of the precious material. She is said to have worn a robe made from a multi-coloured silk called *washi*, a single length of which cost 50,000 dinars. She appears to have been a veritable fashion icon to the ladies of the court.

### **The Ebb and Flow of the Islamic States of Central Asia**

Worlds on Worlds are rolling ever  
 From creation to decay,  
 Like the bubbles on a river  
 Sparkling, bursting, borne away.

(Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Worlds on Worlds* – Chorus from *Hellas*) During the ninth century a number of semi-autonomous Islamic states began to emerge in Central Asia. The Tahirids (821–73) and Saffarids (867–908) were quickly followed by the empire of the Samanids (875–999) – a dynasty founded by an Iranian noble, Saman, from northern Afghanistan. A convert to Islam, Saman and his son Asad were able to achieve little more than local prominence during their lifetimes but around 820, Saman's four grandsons became governors of Herat, Samarkand, Ferghana and Tashkent. Nasr ibn Ahmad (r.864–92), son of the Ferghana governor, eventually assumed control of all Transoxiana and, by 892, Nasr's brother Ismail (r.892–907) was in control of the entire eastern region of the Abbasid Caliphate, headquartered in the town of Bukhara.

The Samanids ruled with the consent of the Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad and enjoyed a large degree of autonomy. Samanid territory reached its greatest extent during the reign of Nasr II ibn Ahmad (r.914–43), from Tashkent (Chach) in the north and Ferghana in the north-east to Ray (south of Tehran) in the south-west.

Under Samanid rule the trade routes, both east and west, became safe again and commerce flourished. Midway between Samarkand and Bukhara, the massive brick-built caravanserai at Rabat-I-Malik (built before 1078) attests to the high level of commercial activity along the Silk Road during the tenth and eleventh centuries (see [Figure 24](#)). Johannes Kalter (1984) provides a list of trade goods compiled by the tenth-century Arab geographer Mukadasi. Rugs and prayer mats from Bukhara and Samarkand; woollen cloth and fine weavings; cotton, silk, soap, cosmetics; bows and other weapons; armour, horse-fittings, tents, foodstuffs (including raisins, nuts, sesame and honey); livestock (including horses, sheep and cattle); hawks for hunting; gold, silver, sulphur and iron – all were exported to China and the West. Kalter also mentions the tens of thousands of Samanid coins found in Scandinavia and lesser numbers of the same that were unearthed in Central Europe, a testament to the commercial reach of the Silk Road traders of Central Asia.

Surviving works of art from the Samanid period are scarce. Earthenware pottery is an exception and was produced in large quantities at Nishapur and Samarkand (Afrasiab) from the ninth to the eleventh century. Several types of pottery were produced, the most distinctive being a red or buff body with polychrome designs beneath a colourless glaze – apparently made only at Nishapur. The typical vessel was a thinly potted bowl with flaring sides, but ewers were also made. Colours typically included black, red, yellow and green and the popularity of huntsmen and cavaliers as subject matter suggests that Sasanian influence was still strong. Ceramics with designs in black or brown on a smooth cream or white ground were made at both centres, although at Nishapur the designs tended to be stylised and stark in appearance. Black-on-white ‘Samarkand ware’ (actually made at several centres) was painted in a less austere manner than its Nishapur counterpart. Pithy decorative inscriptions in neat, geometric Kufic script – such as ‘He who is afflicted by greed, his nightmares are of poverty’ – were the order of the day. Blessings, poems and quotations from famous people were also added.

Ceramics with a red or pink slip, and covered with underglaze painting in shades of yellow, white and manganese brown, are found only at Samarkand. Typical motifs are stylised birds or animals within roundels and bold Kufic inscriptions. The fourth type is known as splash-ware and was made at both

centres. Bowls and plates with green, yellow and purplish manganese brown running glazes were made, reminiscent of, but not necessarily derived from, Tang *sancai* ceramics. Examples from Samarkand are undoubtedly finer, many covered with a fine *sgraffito*<sup>5</sup> design resembling a spider's web.

Ceramics wares of the Samanid period were utilitarian objects. They could rarely be described as being great art. This was not the case with the mere handful of textiles to have survived from this period. Silk cloth was the Silk Road's staple currency and patterned silks (known as *zandaniji*) were more valuable than almost any other commodity. The 'St Josse silk' – produced in Khurasan around 960 for the Samanid *amir* (governor) Abu Mansur Bukhtegin – was formerly in the church of St. Josse sur Mer in the Pas de Calais region of France and is now in the Musée du Louvre in Paris. Its motifs are an extraordinary mix of styles from the countries of the Silk Road. Made of woven silk on cotton textile, decorated with elephants, camels and dragons, the 'St Josse silk' is embellished with a Kufic inscription that reads: 'Glory and happiness to *amir* Abu Mansur Bukhtegin, may God prolong (His favours to him?)'. The textile is a product of Central Asia yet the dragons at the elephants' feet recall those of China, the camels along the border wear ribbons in Sasanian style, and the textile itself, though it possesses 'a barbaric boldness and ostentation that are of the very heart of Asia',<sup>6</sup> came thousands of miles along the Silk Road to wrap a Christian relic in a French church. Another interesting point is that this textile is a representational art form, seemingly at odds with the belief in Islam that depictions of humans and animals are taboo. In fact the Qur'an does not proscribe such images – objections occur only in the *hadiths*, the traditional sayings ascribed to the Prophet.

Glasswork of the Samanid era was exceptionally fine and, like many other art forms from the period, it draws inspiration from Sasanian prototypes. Vessels were blown and sometimes decorated with a molten thread laid upon the surface in a spiral or a swirl.

Of the great buildings that once stood in the Samanid's capital city, Bukhara, almost nothing of the period remains. The mausoleum of Ismail Samanid, dating to the beginning of the tenth century, is the only Samanid structure extant in the city. There is no doubt, however, that many of the Islamic world's greatest minds were nourished by the Samanids. The greatest of them all was Ibn Sina, or

Avicenna (980–1037) – known for centuries as ‘the prince of all learning’ – and the fruits of his intellect are one of the Silk Road’s most precious commodities. His medical encyclopaedia, known simply as *The Canon (Qanun)*, found its way to Europe via the Silk Road and was the standard reference on the subject for 500 years. Ibn Sina, though born in Balkh, was educated in Bukhara and received encouragement and financial support from enlightened Samanid rulers, under whom Persian language and culture enjoyed a renaissance (for more on Ibn Sina).

Another beneficiary of Samanid patronage was Abu Raihan Al-Biruni (973–1048), one of the most remarkable scholars and scientists of the ancient Islamic world. Al-Biruni was a son of Khiva and was educated under the Samanids, but his career after about 1017 was spent far from home in the service of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni. The multilingual Al-Biruni accompanied Mahmud on his campaigns across India and has left a treasure-store of information about the sub-continent during the medieval period.

Despite their Persian ancestry the Samanids were ardent Sunni Muslims and they embarked upon a concerted campaign to first convert, and then provide military training, to the region’s Turkish tribesmen. These Turkish military slaves embraced Islam but retained their own traditions, language and culture. By the latter part of the tenth century those Turks who had embraced Islam were welcomed into the very heart of the Samanid government. In 961 a Turkish slave-soldier named Alptigin, who had already become commander-in-chief of the army, successfully engineered his own appointment as governor of Khurasan. He was quickly divested of his post, however, and sought refuge in the town of Ghazni in modern Afghanistan. After his death in about 963 he was succeeded by another ex-slave named Sebuktigin (r.977–97), founder of the Ghaznavid Empire, who seems to have regarded himself as a loyal vassal of the Samanids. To the north another Turkish dynasty, the Kharakhanids, displaced the Karluks of the region east of Ferghana and established themselves at the town of Uzgen on the banks of a tributary of the Jaxartes (Syr Darya) in modern Kyrgyzstan. The Kharakhanids, the first Turkish tribe to adopt Islam, appear to have emerged in the area around Balasagun on the Chu River. During the middle part of the tenth century their territories were extended eastwards as far as Kashgar where they established their capital under Satuk Bughra Khan (d.

c.955). Under Bughra Khan Harun the Kharakhanids took advantage of confusion among the Samanids, caused by internal dissent and by pressure applied by the new Buyid rulers of Persia. In 992 Harun entered Bukhara virtually unopposed and it was only his sudden illness and premature death that prevented the town from being immediately incorporated into the Kharakhanid Empire. The Samanids appealed for help to the Ghaznavid Turks under Sebuktigin. In return for his assistance Sebuktigin was given control of Khurasan, leaving only Transoxiana (the lands between the Oxus and the Jaxartes) under Samanid control. During their final years the Samanids were sandwiched precariously between the Ghaznavids – who controlled Khurasan and Afghanistan to the south and south-west – and the Kharakhanids, who held the steppes around the Chu and Ili rivers and Kasgharia to the north-east. The end was not long in coming. In 999 fighting erupted between the last Samanid ruler Abd al-Malik II and the illustrious Mahmud of Ghazni (r.998–1032), son of Sebuktigin. Abd al-Malik was defeated by Mahmud close to the city of Merv and the Samanids abandoned Khurasan to the victors. The Kharakhanid ruler Arslan Ilek Nasr grasped the opportunity later that year and seized Bukhara, taking Abd al-Malik prisoner and annexing the whole of Transoxiana. The fall of the Samanid dynasty marked the end of Persian domination of Central Asia. From 999 onwards the area was divided between the Ghaznavids and the Kharakhanids, both Turkish dynasties. The area became Turkicised and has remained so to the present day.

A brief accord was reached between Ghaznavids and the Kharakhanids, with Mahmud taking Arslan's daughter in marriage, but the alliance soon fell apart. By 1005, Mahmud had conquered the Punjab and now controlled north-western India, Afghanistan and Khurasan. In 1006, while Mahmud was campaigning in India, Arslan invaded Khurasan and seized Balkh and Nishapur. Mahmud drove them out of Khurasan in 1008 and the Ghaznavids progressively enlarged their empire until, by 1025, it extended as far west as Iraq and as far south as the Ganges. The same year Mahmud attacked the Kharakhanid ruler Alitigin and advanced briefly as far as Samarkand. He did not hold the city for long, however, and retired to Khurasan. Transoxiana remained under Kharakhanid control but, in 1040, the Ghaznavids were defeated close to Merv by the Seljuks – another Turkish tribe who appear to have lived around the mouth of the Syr

Darya (Jaxartes) River. After their defeat by the Seljuks the Ghaznavids were expelled from Khurasan and confined to their domains in northern India and Afghanistan. The Seljuks quickly seized more territory and, in 1055, entered Baghdad where the Abbasid caliph effectively handed over control of all of Central Asia to them. The Seljuk Empire was expanded east and west until it extended from the Mediterranean to the Oxus. In 1071, the Byzantine emperor, Romanus IV Diogenes, was taken captive by the then sultan, Alp Arslan (r.1063–72). After Diogenes's defeat the Seljuks established the Sultanate of 'Rum' (i.e., 'eastern Rome') in present-day Turkey, thereby laying the foundations for the emergence of the Ottoman Empire some two centuries later. In 1072, Alp Arslan attacked the territory of the Kharakhanids. Balkh, Bukhara and Samarkand changed hands, once again, and the Kharakhanids were reduced to little more than vassals of the Seljuks – although another branch of the tribe still retained control of the lands around the Ili River and Kashgaria.

Alp Arslan's son Malikshah (r.1072–92) allowed the Persian vizier Nizam al-Mulk to administer the Seljuk's empire for 20 years. Nizam al-Mulk was one of the most enlightened statesmen of his day. He helped to establish a system of *madrassahs* or theological seminaries (known as *nizamiyah* after the first part of his name). The *madrassahs* provided students with free instruction in religious science. His work *The Book of Government*, written around 1090, influenced much of the political thought of the time. Nizam al-Mulk was a devout Sunni Muslim who railed against an Ismaili sect of the Shi'ites who terrorised the region at that time. Known as the Assassins, they were an offshoot of the Sevener Shi'ites and used murder to further their political ends. Nizam al-Mulk himself fell victim to the sect in 1092.

The period of peace and intellectual enlightenment ushered in by the Seljuks was short-lived, however. After the Kharakhanid ruler Arslan Khan Muhammad's death in 1129, the Seljuk Empire fractured as a result of nepotism and feuds among the ruling clans. The eastern part of the Seljuk Empire was sustained for a while by Sultan Sanjar (r. c.1118–57), Malikshah's youngest son and the last of the great Seljuk rulers. Sanjar was given the governorship of Khurasan when he was little more than ten years old, with his headquarters at Merv. He survived attempts by Kharakhanid khans to break free of Seljuk control and, by 1118, was ruler of both Ghaznavid Afghanistan and Transoxiana,

with his capital at Merv. The Seljuk domains in the east held together until 1141 when a new threat emerged in the shape of the Kharakhitai, the first of many waves of Mongols who would decimate the countries of the Silk Road over the following centuries.

### **The Prester John Legend and Islam at a Hiatus**

The Kharakhitai were a non-Muslim tribe of Mongolian descent, said to be descendants of the Liao dynasty Khitans of China.<sup>7</sup> In about 1128 they entered Kashgaria with an army and attacked the Kharakhanids from the rear. As the Kharakhitai moved westwards they wrested town after town from the Muslims, a campaign that culminated in 1141 with the defeat of the Seljuk sultan, Sanjar, and the seizure of the great Silk Road cities of Samarkand and Bukhara. In the same year the Kharakhitai invaded Khorezm and before long were presiding over an empire that extended from Hami in China's Xinjiang province to the Aral Sea. The religious beliefs of the Kharakhitai were mixed and included Buddhism, Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity. The mosques of conquered towns were sometimes converted into Buddhist temples or Nestorian churches. For two centuries, first under the Kharakhitai and, subsequently, under the armies of Genghis Khan and his clansmen, Islamic supremacy of the central section of the Silk Road was severely challenged. It did not recover until the fourteenth century when Mongol rule began to decline. The beleaguered Frankish Knights of the Crusades heard stories of a Christian king in the East who was beating back the forces of Islam and the legend of 'Prester John' was born. In fact the Kharakhitai were driven by Mammon, not God, a fact that failed to dispel a belief in Europe that a second front was about to be opened in the battle against the spread of Islam.

The legend gained greater currency during the second half of the twelfth century when at least one forged letter, purportedly from Prester John himself, was sent to Manuel I Comnenus, Emperor of Byzantium (r.1143–80): I, Prester John, who reign supreme, surpass in virtue, riches and power all creatures under heaven. Seventy kings are our tributaries. I am a zealous Christian and universally protect the Christians of our empire, supporting them by our alms. We have determined to visit the sepulchre of our Lord with a very large army, in accordance with the glory of our majesty to humble and chastise the enemies of

the cross of Christ and to exalt his blessed name [...] For gold, silver, precious stones, animals of every kind and the number of our people, we believe there is not our equal under heaven.

(An extract from a forged letter, purportedly from Prester John to Manuel I Comnenus, Emperor of Byzantium, c.1165. Quoted in Rossabi, 1992) The letter created a sensation in Europe and men set out, both *officio* and *ex-officio*, to search for him, many no doubt enticed by the ‘gold, silver [and] precious stones’ referred to in the letter. Marco Polo himself mentions Prester John in his *Travels* and the quest continued well into the fourteenth century, but no trace of the great man was ever found. Europeans eventually turned their attention to Africa, in particular to the kingdom of Ethiopia, which had a long tradition of Christian belief. The search for Prester John undoubtedly led to greater contacts between Europe and China, however, and was a factor in a brief but significant revival of commercial activity along the Silk Road before the highway entered a period of terminal decline during the fourteenth century.

**A Short Period of Relative Calm Before a Raging Storm: The Khorezmshahs** After the death of the Seljuk Sultan Sanjar in 1157, his former vassals, the shahs of Khorezm (the area east and south of the Aral Sea), quickly moved into the former Seljuk territories. Like the Seljuks the Khorezmshahs were Muslim Turks who saw themselves as defenders of the faith against the pagan Kharakhitai. In spite of this they sought help from the Kharakhitai when it suited them and remained their nominal vassals. In 1172, the Kharakhitai intervened in a dispute between two brothers – Takash and Sultan-shah – who fought for the throne of Khorezm. They first supported Takash but, when he refused to pay them tribute, they switched sides and began to support his brother. Assistance from the Kharakhitai enabled Sultan-shah to retain control of the Khurasan region until his death in 1193, while Takash remained firmly in control of Khorezm. After Sultan-shah’s death, Takash became master of both domains and wasted no time in invading Iraq. During the reign of his son Muhammad (r.1200–20), the Khorezmian territories were expanded to include the Ghurid lands in Afghanistan. The Ghurids, a clan confederation of Iranian origin, were former vassals of the Ghaznavids and in 1151 replaced them as rulers of Afghanistan, forcing the latter to flee to the Punjab region. During the long reign of their ruler Muhammad of Ghur (1163–1206) the Ghurids expanded eastwards, first seizing the Punjab from the Ghaznavids and then, by 1203, defeating the Hindu rulers of the Ganges basin. The Ghurids were Sunni Muslims and were great builders, counting two of Islam’s finest buildings: the Qutb Minar in Delhi and the 65 m high Jam Minaret at the site of their former capital of Firuzukh in Afghanistan – among their achievements.

It was inevitable that Shah Muhammad of Khorezm and Muhammad of Ghur would come to blows. The first battle occurred in 1204 and the Khorezmian ruler lost it. The Ghurids then proceeded to attack Khorezm itself but were driven back by a combined force of Khorezmians, Kharakhitai and soldiers sent by their vassal, the Kharakhanid ruler of Samarkand. Now at the height of his powers, Shah Muhammad of Khorezm rebelled against Kharakhitai rule and, with the consent of the Kharakhanid ruler of Samarkand, marched on both that city and on Bukhara. The Kharakhitai made a vain attempt to regain sovereignty of the region but were defeated and, by 1210, had ceased to play a major role in Transoxiana. The Kharakhanid prince of Samarkand – the last of the line – soon rebelled against Muhammad but was executed, leaving the Khorezmian in sole charge of a vast, though loosely connected, empire extending from the Pamirs in the east to Azerbaijan in the west. All Central Asia and almost all of Afghanistan and Persia were his, and in 1217 he threatened even Baghdad. Muhammad ruled from a series of fortified towns across Central Asia with his capital at Kunya Urgench (Gurganj). During the brief, twilight years of the Khorezmian Empire, he postured and preened himself as the Mongol storm gathered in the East. René Grousset provides a succinct summation of the differences between the doomed Khorezmian Muhammad and the ‘World Conqueror’, Genghis Khan: ‘Of the two, the nomad barbarian was the ruler, while the Iranized Turk, an emperor of Islam and a king of the sedentary states, was nothing but a knight errant’ (Grousset, 1970).

## CHAPTER FOUR

# The Mongols

In 1218, with the Mongol conquest of North China complete, Genghis Khan sent his most trusted general Jebe Noyen to campaign against the remnants of the Kharakhitai in eastern Turkestan, its people already weakened by seven years of depredations at the hands of Küchlüg, leader of the Turko-Mongol Naiman tribe. A Nestorian Christian, Küchlüg had terrorised the region between Tashkent and Kashgar and forcibly converted many of its Muslim inhabitants. By 1218 he had more-or-less assumed control of the Kharakhitai domains and was deemed by the Mongols to represent a genuine threat to their territory. There may also have been an element of revenge to the decision to attack Küchlüg: he is said to have killed a son-in-law of Genghis Khan's son Jochi. In any event, 20,000 Mongols with Jebe at their head were soon sweeping down to Kashgar. Küchlüg fled towards the Pamirs but was captured and killed, thereby removing the last barrier between the Mongols and the Khorezmshahs. Genghis Khan, at least initially, sought to open trading relations with the Khorezmshahs. The same year three envoys were sent to Muhammad in his capital at Kunya Urgench (Gurganj) with, (in the words of the Persian chronicler Juzjani), the following message:

I am master of the lands of the rising sun while you rule those of the setting sun. Let us conclude a firm treaty of friendship and peace. Merchants and their caravans should come and go in both directions, carrying the valuable products and ordinary goods from my land to yours, just as they do from your land to mine.

(Juzjani, *Tabaqat-I-Nasiri*. Quoted in Ratchnevsky, 1991)



**Figure 11**

‘The World Conqueror’, Temuchin, known as Genghis Khan (c.1165–1227).

The same year, a trade caravan of 450 Muslim merchants on their way from Mongolia, and accompanied by a Mongol envoy, stopped in the Khorezmian frontier town of Otrar (on the Oxus in modern Kazakhstan). The city’s governor, Inal-Khan – a relative of Shah Muhammad’s mother – decided that the merchants were spies and ordered that they be killed and their goods seized. Genghis Khan was said to have been incandescent with rage and sent envoys to Muhammad demanding that Inal-Khan be handed over for punishment. Muhammad refused and had one, or possibly all, of the envoys murdered as well. These actions by Muhammad and Inal-Khan were to propel the world into an abyss, setting in motion a chain of events that would lead to the deaths of millions of people from the Danube to the Sea of Japan.



**Figure 12**

Ruins of the Mongol capital at Karakorum, Upper Orkhon River, Mongolia. Founded c.1220 by Ögödei, son of Genghis Khan.

Muhammad's fragile and newly fledged empire, riven by hatred between its Iranian and Turkish peoples, was no match for the well-organised legions of Genghis. Genghis is said to have launched his campaign against Khorezm with a force of 150,000–200,000 men. Otrar was the first to fall, taken in February 1220 after a five-month siege. The hapless governor, Inal-Khan, who had ordered the killing of the merchants, was captured and tortured to death, one chronicler reporting that molten silver was poured into his eyes and ears.

The city of Bukhara was next to be besieged, also in February 1220, and this time by a force led by Genghis himself. Most of the populace fled the city and were spared but the 500 or so Turkish soldiers who attempted to defend the city were annihilated. One of the chroniclers, Juvaini, reported that Genghis entered

the city's great mosque, declared himself 'the scourge of God' and yelled abuse at the worshippers gathered there – but this tale is apocryphal in the extreme. What is not in dispute, however, is that the Mongols plundered Bukhara and as they did so a fire broke out which reduced the city to ashes. A graphic account from an eyewitness to the destruction of Bukhara contains a terse summation of what awaited those unfortunate enough to find themselves in the path of the Mongol advance: '*Amadand, u kundang, u sukhtand, u kushtand, u burdand, u raftand.*' ('They came, they uprooted, they burned, they slew, they despoiled, they departed.' Quoted in Lawton, 1991.)

Samarkand was attacked in March 1220, again by an army led by the world conqueror himself. The inhabitants resisted for only five days before surrendering. About 30,000 Turkish defenders were slaughtered but most of the citizenry were spared – many of the town's best craftsmen were sent back to Mongolia to work for their new masters. The Mongols destroyed the aqueduct in Afrasiab, the oldest section of the city, an act that led to its abandonment. Most of the town seems to have escaped, however – a view supported by a description by Marco Polo, who passed through the city only about 60 years later: 'Samarcan is a noble city, adorned with beautiful gardens, and surrounded by a plain, in which are produced all the fruits that man can desire' (from *The Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian*, translated by William Marsden in Polo, 1948).

The Khorezmian capital, Kunya Urgench (Gurganj) held out until April 1221 (or even later, according to some commentators). The siege was so protracted that no fewer than three of Genghis Khan's elder sons, including Ögödei, became involved. As the city fell, the last of the defenders are said to have huddled on a low mound known as Forty Mullahs Hill and were slaughtered. Their contorted remains are still visible at the base of the mound ([Figure 13](#)).

The inhabitants of cities who resisted the Mongols were usually massacred and such was the case with the citizens of Kunya Urgench: 24 were killed by each Mongol soldier. The Mongols then breached a nearby dam and the city was quickly submerged by the waters of the Oxus (Amu Darya). As his kingdom was demolished around him, Shah Muhammad fled westwards with the Mongols in pursuit. He died of pneumonia on a small island in the Caspian in December 1220 – spared, at least, the spectacle of seeing his capital destroyed.

During the early part of 1221, Genghis Khan continued his campaigns across

the Oxus. Balkh, Merv and Nishapur were taken in rapid succession and all flattened. At Merv, Genghis's son Tolui is said to have sat on a golden chair and watched as the population was massacred, the mausoleum of the great Seljuk sultan, Sanjar, put to the torch and his body removed. The town of Herat resisted and was destroyed – although its civilian populace were uncharacteristically spared – followed in short order by Thaleqan and Bamiyan. During the siege of Bamiyan, Genghis' favourite grandson Mütügen was killed; Genghis ordered every living thing in the city to be extirpated. Ghazni was next to be taken and Prince Jalal AD-Din, son of Muhammad and last scion of the Khorezmshahs, was almost captured. In the event he escaped across a river and found refuge in Delhi at the court of the sultan. He campaigned against the Mongols for another ten years – partially restoring the Khorezmian Empire in the process and forcing Ögödei to launch a new invasion of Persia to restore order. He was finally killed in 1231 by a Kurdish assassin in the mountains of Azerbaijan.



**Figure 13**

'Golden lads and girls all must, As chimney-sweepers, come to dust'.<sup>1</sup> Victims of the Mongols, 'Forty Mullahs Hill', Kunya Urgench, Turkmenistan.

Genghis Khan died in August 1227 aged about 60 years old, probably as a result of injuries sustained in a fall from a horse. His grandson Batu (son of Jochi, who had pre-deceased him) inherited the western part of the empire. This

region – the steppes to the north of the Aral Sea and west of the Irtysh River – later became the realm of the Golden Horde. Genghis' second son, Chagatai, inherited the lands extending from Bukhara and the Oxus in the west to the Tarim basin in the east; and his third son, Ögödei, received the area to the east of Lake Balkash, southern Siberia and the western part of Mongolia. His youngest son Tolui was bequeathed the Mongol heartlands between the Tula, upper Onon and upper Kerulen rivers.

Ögödei was elected Great Khan in 1229. With his capital at Karakorum on the banks of the upper Orkhon River, Ögödei presided over a second conquest. By 1231 the Mongols had taken control of Persia and by 1241 they had seized the southern area of Russia and advanced as far as Hungary, Poland and Romania. A sense of how terrifying the Mongols must have seemed can be gleaned from contemporary accounts. A description by a Persian observer is one of the most vivid:

Their stench was more horrible than their colour. Their heads were set on their bodies as if they had no necks, and their cheeks resembled leather bottles full of wrinkles and knots. Their noses extended from cheekbone to cheekbone. Their nostrils resembled rotting graves [...] Their chests, in colour half-black, half-white, were covered with lice which looked like sesame growing on bad soil. Their bodies, indeed, were covered with these insects, and their skins were as rough-grained as shagreen leather, fit only to be converted into shoes.

By July 1241, Mongol troops under an army led by Batu were at the gates of Vienna and the whole of western Europe lay supine before them. Then, in December 1241, Ögödei died and the Mongols withdrew, returning to Karakorum to participate in proceedings to appoint a new Great Khan (known as a *khuriltay*). The respite was brief, however, and by 1256 the Mongols were again rampaging through Persia. Hulägu, brother of the Khan Mangu and first of the Il-Khans, began his campaign by putting down the sect of the Assassins at Alamut in the mountains in the north of the country. Baghdad was attacked and destroyed in 1258 and the last Abbasid caliph sewn into a sack and trampled to death by horses. Syria was next and many of its cities, including Aleppo and Damascus, were sacked. Very little representational art survives from the Mongol period – nomadic peoples are not generally known for the fineness of their artistic creations. Furthermore, the Mongols did not generally interfere with the religious beliefs of their subject peoples, and Islam (with its dislike of images

of humans or animals) still held sway in Central Asia and the Middle East. Persian paintings and manuscripts of the early fourteenth century provide a rare glimpse of what the Mongol raids must have been like for those unfortunate enough to be on the receiving end.

The limits of the Mongols' westward expansion were reached in 1260<sup>2</sup> when they attacked Egypt. The Mamluks – mercenaries of Turkish origin who had first supported and then overthrown the Ayyubid sultans of Egypt – realised that Hulāgu's army of only 20,000 men was insufficient to sustain an assault. The Mongols were pushed out of Egypt and Syria, too, was soon reconquered.

To the east, the Mongol advance continued. In 1259, Khubilai, brother of Nagu, became the Great Khan and during his long rule (1259–94) the Song rulers of China were defeated and the entire country fell under Mongol control. Khubilai and his descendants, with their capital at Beijing, ruled China as the Yuan dynasty until 1368. The Mongols also advanced into Burma, Indochina and Java but failed in two attempts to reach Japan – the second time foiled by a typhoon, described by the grateful Japanese as a *kamikaze* or 'divine wind'.

### **The Mongols and the Silk Road**

There is little doubt that the Mongols were one of the most bellicose and pitiless nations ever to have stalked the earth. Genghis Khan himself, in a much-quoted remark attributed to the Persian chronicler Rashid al-Din, describes his own vision of supreme bliss:

Man's greatest good fortune is to chase and defeat his enemy, seize his total possessions, leave his married women weeping and wailing, ride his gelding, use the bodies of his women as a nightshirt and support, gazing upon and kissing their rosy breasts, sucking their lips which are as sweet as the berries of their breasts.

But his legacy, and that of his successors, was far more than one of despoilment and death. The linguistic make-up of Central Asia was permanently altered by Mongol rule. The Persian language was supplanted by Turkic dialects although the urban dwellers of Central Asia still use the former even today. Religious changes also occurred. The more mystic forms of Islam – such as Sufism or Dervishism – became popular as a result of the cataclysmic events experienced on a virtually daily basis by the populace. Crime – especially theft – was ruthlessly stamped out and, for a fleeting moment, centuries of anarchy and strife

among the countries along the Silk Road came to an end. With their safety guaranteed, merchants practised their craft as never before:

Under the reign of Jenghiz [Genghis] Khan, all the country between Iran and Turan [the lands of the Turks] enjoyed such peace that a man might have journeyed from the land of sunrise to the land of sunset with a golden platter upon his head without suffering the least violence from anyone.  
(Abu'l Ghazi Bahadur, Khan of Khiva (r.1643–65), in his treatise '*Shajare-I Turk*', a work containing a wealth of detail about the Mongols. Quoted in Grousset, 1970)

While the resurgence of trade benefited mainly the rich, the century and more of the *Pax Mongolica* can have seemed little worse to the beleaguered ordinary citizens of Central Asia than the endless cycle of warfare and revolt described in the preceding pages. An interesting innovation of the Mongols was the use, for the first time, of the passport, known as a *paizi* or *gerege*. The *paizi* consisted of a bronze or iron plate, inscribed or inlaid in silver with *Phags-Pa* script, named after and devised by a Tibetan monk in the service of Khubilai to enable the Mongols to accurately transcribe Chinese names. Most *paizi* have a lobed handle with a *kirttimukha* (demon) mask to facilitate attachment to a belt or strap. After the Ming expelled the Mongols from China in 1368, the new regime appears to have tried to erase all trace of them. The Mongol capital at Karakorum was destroyed in 1388 and the accoutrements of Mongol rule, including *paizi*, were done away with. As a result there are only about 12 *paizi* in existence today. A typical inscription might read:

By the strength of Eternal Heaven,  
an edict of the Emperor [Khan].  
He who has no respect shall be guilty.

Two types of plaque were issued: one to officials as a badge of office, and the other to important guests or persons on state business. Post stations were set up at intervals of about 40–50 km and travellers carrying *paizi* were able to traverse the empire unimpeded, a system which greatly facilitated trade and diplomatic contacts.

Among the many Europeans to travel the Silk Road at this time were Marco Polo (whose contentious exploits are mentioned throughout this book), Johannes di Plano Carpini – sent to Karakorum in 1246 by Pope Innocent IV – and William of Rubric, an emissary of Louis IX of France. Both Carpini and Rubric mentioned that Westerners were already at Karakorum. One, a Frenchwoman

named Paquette, had accompanied her Russian husband who served the khan as an architect. A Parisian goldsmith named Guillaume Boucher is said to have lived with the Mongols from c.1246–59, serving first Guyuk and then Mangu. He designed a golden tree, beneath which sat four golden lions with wine and *kumiss* flowing from their mouths.

By the first half of the fourteenth century, trade was so well developed that European merchants began to compile guides for travellers. The most famous of these was *La Practica della Mercatura* ('The Practice of Trade'), compiled in 1340 by Francesco Balducci Pegolotti (*fl.*1315–40). There is no evidence that Pegolotti, a mercantile agent in the employ of the powerful Bardi family of Florence, ever travelled to China. He was more of a latter-day Herodotus, a gatherer of information and stories from travellers. Nevertheless, his book is a mine of information about trade routes, taxes payable on merchandise, the location of the principal markets and the comparative values of moneys, weights and measures. He talks at length about the cost of such journeys:

You may calculate that a merchant with a dragoman, and with two men servants, and with goods to the value of twenty-five thousand golden florins, should spend on his way to Cathay from sixty to eighty *sommi* of silver, and not more if he manage well; and for all the road back again from Cathay to Tana,<sup>3</sup> including the expenses of living and the pay of servants, and all other charges, the cost will be about five *sommi* per head of pack animals, or something less. And you may reckon the *sommo* to be worth five golden florins. You may reckon also that each ox-waggon will require one ox, and will carry ten cantars Genoese weight; and the camel-waggon will require three camels, and will carry thirty cantars Genoese weight; and the horse-waggon will require one horse, and will commonly carry six and a half cantars of silk, at 250 Genoese pounds to the cantar. And a bale of silk may be reckoned at between 110 and 115 Genoese pounds.

(Francesco Balducci Pegolotti in 1340. Translated by Yule, 1914)

The astute observations of another traveller, Ibn Battuta of Tangiers (1304–77), have also survived. Ibn Battuta set out in 1325 on a 24-year journey through Egypt, Iran, Central Asia and northern India. After residing in Delhi for eight years he took a ship to China, stopping off in Java and Sumatra on the way. His descriptions are far more precise than those of Marco Polo, raising the oft-asked question of whether the latter ever actually made the journey. Ibn Battuta is regarded by many, both within and without the Islamic world, as one of the greatest travellers in history. One seventeenth-century admirer summarised his accomplishments thus:

He it was who hung the world,  
that turning wheel of diverse parts,  
upon the axis of a book.

A contemporary of Ibn Battuta was English knight Sir John Mandeville, who wrote an account of the 34 years he spent travelling the world and of the cultures and customs of the places he visited. His work is commonly known as *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* and first appeared in French in about 1356, followed by an English edition around 1375. Until the nineteenth-century Mandeville was celebrated as one of the greatest travellers of the Middle Ages, but when the intrepid explorers of the Victorian era arrived on the scene it became clear that not only had he not actually been to the places he described, in all probability he did not even exist. It has been suggested that the true author was a French physician named Jean de Bourgogne – but whatever the truth of the matter, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* is still one of the most colourful and interesting of the many accounts of the countries of the Silk Road.

Much has been written about the many Europeans who travelled to the Orient during the years of the *Pax Mongolica*. A little-known fact is that a number of Chinese travellers journeyed west during the same period. What the stolid citizens of Europe's cities thought of them is unknown, but a few made the journey and lived to tell the tale. Perhaps the most celebrated was the Chinese Nestorian Monk Rabban Bar Sauma (d.1294). In about 1275 Sauma and his disciple Mark set off from Peking to visit the Holy Land. They passed through Tabriz – then under the control of the Mongol khan Arghun (r.1284–91) – and visited the city's Nestorian prelate. Arghun sent Sauma as an envoy to Rome. From Rome he continued on to Gascony where he met the king of England and thence to Paris where he met Philip, the French king.

Before Karakorum was destroyed in 1388, merchandise from all the Mongol domains flowed into the city. Excavations of graves in and around the site have unearthed large numbers of coins from the Arab world and from China, while Rubric tells us of rich fabrics from China and Persia, furs from Russia and eastern Europe and slaves from every province of the Mongol Empire. Perhaps the strangest relic from Karakorum is an Egyptian pharaoh mask of about 20 cm in height, discovered in the grave of a Mongol woman and now displayed in the Ulaan Bator Museum. It was, perhaps, booty from their campaigns in Egypt in 1260.

In the arts, the forcible movement of peoples to serve the Mongols resulted in a wide dissemination of new styles and ideas. Islamic art, particularly, was revitalised by influences from China that travelled westwards during the years of the *Pax Mongolica*. The emergence of Persian miniature painting during the fourteenth century was undoubtedly a result of patronage by the Il-Khans, who also encouraged the writing of poetry and historical literature. An intriguing conundrum, still to be satisfactorily unravelled by scholars, is the existence of the Hazara peoples of Afghanistan. The origin of the Hazaras is hotly debated but some claim that they are descendants of the invading armies of Genghis and his successors, perhaps of the ‘thousands’ left behind in each conquered city to propagate the race and to maintain control of the populace. Others claim that the Hazaras migrated to Afghanistan long before Islam, and others still that they are the heirs to Timur. A recent study (Mousavi, 1998) suggests that they have existed in Afghanistan since the pre-Christian era but that their blood and language has mingled with those of other groups – the men of Genghis and Timur among them. Whatever the truth of the matter, they are a strikingly handsome race: a living demonstration of the extent to which trade and conquest led to the movement of peoples over vast distances along the old trade routes.

One of the consequences of the resurgence of Silk Road trade during the period of Mongol domination turned out to be an utter catastrophe for the West. Bubonic plague, contracted from fleas feeding on infected rats, had begun in a famine-affected area of northern China. It afflicted a Kipchak army laying siege to the Genoese port of Caffa in the Crimea and subsequently spread to the cities along the Mediterranean shoreline. Constantinople was stricken in 1347 and, within 20 years, Europe was decimated. In the five-year period 1347–52, about 25 million people died – a third of Europe’s population. In *The Decameron*, the Italian writer and eyewitness Giovanni Boccaccio writes:

How many noble men, how many beautiful ladies, how many light-hearted youths, who were such that Galen, Hippocrates, or Asclepius would declare them the healthiest of all humans, had breakfast in the morning with their relatives, companions, or friends, and had dinner that evening in another world with their ancestors!

## CHAPTER FIVE

# Tamerlane (Timur) and the Timurids

### The world's great age begins anew,

The golden years return,

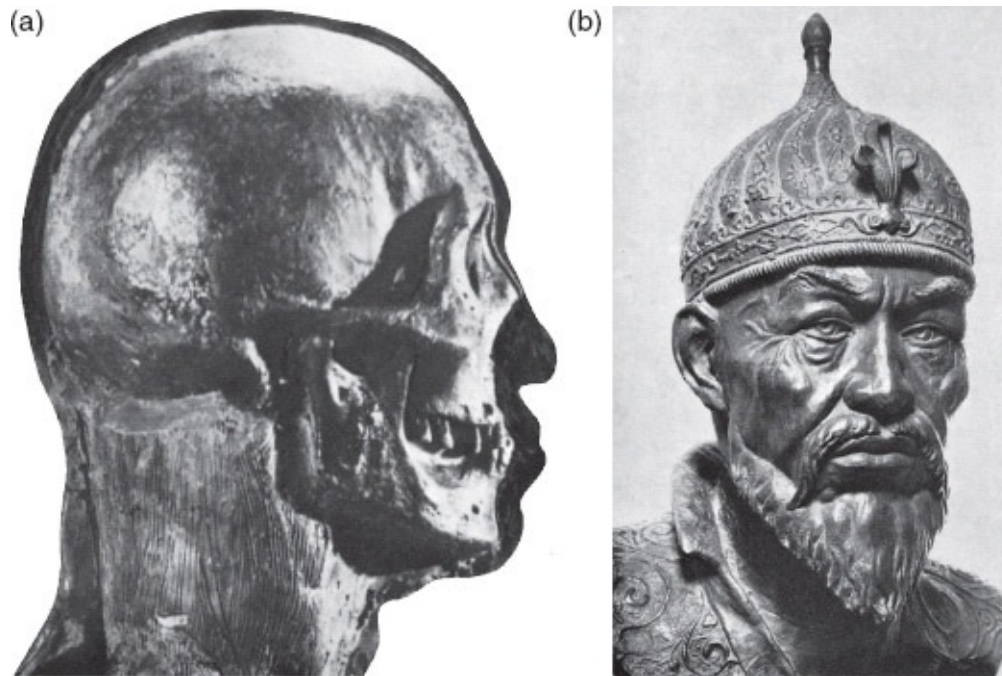
The earth doth like a snake renew

Her winter weeds outworn:

Heaven smiles, and faiths and empires gleam, Like wrecks of a dissolving dream.

(Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The World's Great Age*, from *Hellas*) The last of the great nomad emperors was born in 1336 in the town of Kesh (modern Shakhrisabz, or 'The Green City'), in the Kashka Darya valley to the south of Samarkand. His father was a chief of the Barlas clan, Turkicised Mongols who had entered Transoxiana with Chagatai. His skills as a warrior are said to have been honed during his early career as a sheep-rustler and raider of caravans, and he soon attracted a band of followers not only from the Barlas but also from many of the other tribes marauding across Transoxiana at the time. After the death of Khan Tarmashirin in 1334 there followed 30 years of warfare between the Mongol khans and the Turkish emirs. At the time of Timur's birth the Chagatai *ulus* (territorial apanage) was divided in two – the area around the Talas and Ili rivers (known as Semirechiye or Moghulistan), and Transoxiana itself.

The rulers of Semirechiye regarded themselves as the rightful heirs to the Chagatai *ulus* and launched repeated attacks on Transoxiana with the intention of reintegrating the domains. Timur and his one-time ally and friend Amir Husayn of Balkh fought off the attacks, seeking to restore the *ulus* and make Transoxiana the centre of a vast empire. Their collaboration was short-lived, however, with Timur attacking and defeating Husayn at Balkh in 1370. Husayn relinquished control of his armies and was permitted to depart Balkh and go on a pilgrimage to Mecca but was killed (with or without Timur's assent) soon afterwards. At Balkh, Timur declared himself ruler of the Chagatai *ulus* and extravagantly claimed that he was a descendant of Genghis Khan. To legitimise his position a series of khans of the Chinggisid line were appointed, each as powerless as their predecessor.



**Figures 14a 14b**

The skull and reconstructed face of Timur (1336–1405).

*Exhumed skull photographed by Mikhail Mikhailovich Gerasimov in 1941, at the Gur-e Mir mausoleum, Samarkand (Figure 14a). Reconstructed face (Figure 14b).*

As *de facto* ruler of the Chagatai *ulus* Timur embarked on a 30-year period of military campaigns. The earliest were against Moghulistan (the region around the Talas and Ili rivers) and Khorezm, followed by Khurasan and Persia. In 1386 he launched a three-year campaign to consolidate his dependencies in Iran and the Caucasus and to protect the western part of his empire from Tokhtamish, a former ally who had seized control of the Golden Horde territory in the Volga region. Tokhtamish was contained by a series of campaigns and at one point Timur's army reached the outskirts of Moscow. By attacking the Golden Horde Timur briefly succeeded in shifting the focus of trade from the Volga region back to the Central Asian Silk Road. Timur was more than simply a destroyer – he was also a great patron of the arts and a devout Muslim. Samarkand, Timur's capital, regained its status as a great commercial centre and artisans from all over the conquered territories were forcibly relocated to work on its glorious new buildings. The capture of Baghdad in 1393 and Delhi in 1398 brought about an even greater cultural influx to the Timurid capital and augmented pan-Asian trade further still.

In 1399, Timur went westwards again – his longest campaign yet – taking

Baghdad (once again) and attacking the Mamluks in Syria and the Ottomans in Anatolia. In Syria, Aleppo, Hims and Damascus were taken and the Ottomans were defeated near Ankara in 1402 – their sultan, Bayazid, taken hostage. In the spring of 1404 Timur withdrew from his newly captured territories and returned to Samarkand. Timur was nearing 70 years old but this did not prevent him from making plans for his most ambitious campaign yet – against the Ming emperor of China. While back in Samarkand, Timur convened a *khuriltay*, a Grand Assembly, to celebrate his military victories. Ambassadors from the furthest reaches of the Silk Road came to pay homage: emissaries from the Byzantine Empire – already in its twilight years – and from the Chinese emperor Yung Lo, whose country was faced with the threat of imminent invasion. One of the most distinguished observers at the *khuriltay* was Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo, representative of King Henry III of Castile. Clavijo was an astute observer and has left a record of a great city enjoying its golden age: Every year to the city of Samarqand much merchandise of all kinds came from Cathay, India, Tartary, and from many other quarters besides, for in the countries round the Samarqand territory commerce is very flourishing.

(Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo. Translated by Guy Le Strange in Clavijo, 1928) It is clear from Clavijo's observations of commerce at Samarkand that Chinese merchants were still risking the perils of the road to trade with the cities of Central Asia. Their faith in providence was sometimes misplaced, however: During the month of June of this year, immediately before the date of our coming to Samarqand, there had arrived a caravan of eight hundred camels bringing merchandise from China. Then it was that Timur having come home from his western campaigns had received that Chinese Embassy bearing the message sent him by the Emperor of China: and he forthwith had ordered the whole of this caravan, men and goods, to be taken into custody and that none should return to China.

(Ibid.)

By the autumn of 1404, Timur had assembled a huge army and set off on his greatest campaign: the conquest of China and the forcible conversion of its people to Islam. In Otrar, north of Tashkent, he paused for the winter but in February of 1405 he fell ill and died. Timur's death at Otrar spared China from invasion and was also a neat piece of historical symmetry – the beginning of the Mongols' westward expansion was sparked by the murder of the members of a trade caravan by the city's governor in 1218. After Timur's death his empire rapidly disintegrated amid internecine battles between members of his family. By 1407, the empire had shrunk to include only Khurasan, Afghanistan and

Transoxiana. Despite this, the long reign of Timur's fourth and youngest son Sharukh (r.1405–47) and the brief rule of Sharukh's son Ulugh Beg (r.1447–9) brought a measure of stability and ensured the continuation of trade. Sharukh ruled Khurasan from Herat in modern Afghanistan, while Ulugh Beg governed Transoxiana from Samarkand. Both were enlightened men of letters who oversaw a renaissance in literature, art, science and architecture. Islamic art flourished, delicately illustrated manuscripts were produced, and the great poets of the day extolled the achievements of the Timurids – not only in Persian but in Arabic and Chagatai (eastern Turkish), too.

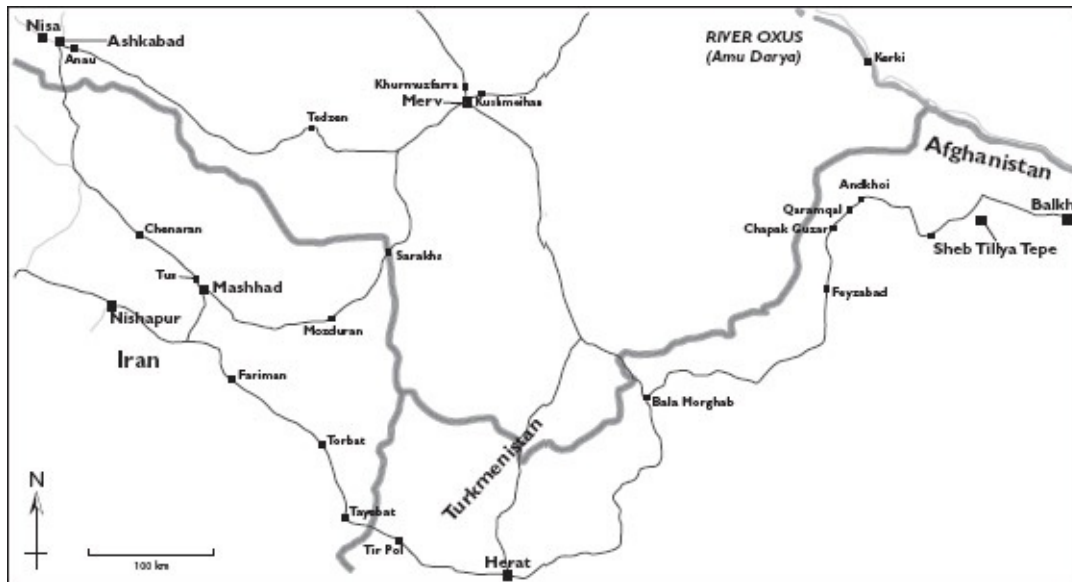
Ulugh Beg was a scholar of great eminence. As a mathematician and astronomer he knew no equal and the massive sextant from the observatory he constructed on a hill overlooking Samarkand can still be seen today. Ulugh Beg also built huge *madrassahs* in Samarkand and Bukhara – theological colleges where the pious might advance their knowledge of Islam. But it was not to last and, in the end, the Timurids proved to be as ephemeral as their predecessors. In 1449, Ulugh Beg was assassinated on the orders of one of his sons; his fascination with science deemed heresy. There followed a bleak period of decline for the remainder of the fifteenth century as the Timurids were relentlessly supplanted by the Uzbeks. The last Timurid was Babur (1483–1530), a man who suffered ignominious defeat at the hands of the Uzbek khan, Ubaydullah, in 1512, but who went on to found the Mughal Empire of India – a dynasty that was to last for 300 years.

## CHAPTER SIX

# The Silk Road Sites Between Balkh and Nisa

But what of the caravan towns of the Silk Road before the coming of the Mongols? They had, after all, already been commercial entrepôts for centuries, and sometimes millennia, before the arrival of Genghis Khan. In fact, Genghis' armies arrived during the twilight years of the Silk Road when trade was already faltering and alternatives to the land routes were being explored. Arabs had been consummate seafarers for centuries and the merchants of Song dynasty China (960–1279), cut off from the traditional land routes through Central Asia by the tumultuous events described above, became accomplished sailors. They competed head-to-head with the Arabs and built great six-masted ships of four storeys height and 40 m in length. Song dynasty porcelain and copper coins have been found in Sri Lanka, the Persian Gulf and the east coast of Africa.

It is often said that little or nothing remains of the Silk Road in Central Asia but this is far from the truth. If one looks a little beneath its Sovietised, industrialised, urbanised surface one can still find the footsteps of the giants who strode across the pages of its history. The rapid development and (sometimes) careless restoration of the great caravan cities of Central Asia has, for the most part, been a feature only of the past 50 years. There are people alive today – as old photographs can attest – who have seen the cities of the Silk Road (albeit in a reduced and ruinous state) as they would have appeared to Avicenna, to Genghis Khan or to Timur. Even today, 600 years after Timur's death, traces of the halcyon days of the Silk Road can still be found. At Merv, next stop on the road west from Balkh and Termez, the old city crumbles back to dust but its tumultuous past is plain for all to see.



**MAP 4**

The Silk Road sites between Balkh and Nisa.

## Merv

With the possible exception of Kunya Urgench (Gurganj) in northern Turkmenistan, there are few Silk Road cities whose aspect today reveals their history as visibly as Merv. As we have seen, Merv was the capital of the eastern Islamic territories and a centre for trade during the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods. By the time the capital was moved to Nishapur during the short-lived Tahirid dynasty (821–73), Merv had already been a major settlement for more than 1,000 years. The routes from Merv went in a number of directions: north to Khorezm (either heading directly across the Karakum Desert or leading north-east to Chardzhou on the Bukhara road and then veering off to follow the Amu Darya), east to Balkh and Termez, south-west to Sarakhs and Nishapur, and west to Nisa. The Murgh (Murghab) River oasis was occupied at least as far back as the beginning of the first millennium BC although the earliest structures at Merv date to the early Achaemenid period (sixth to fifth century BC). They include the massive, 50 m high oval ramparts of the Erk Kala ('The Oval Citadel'), residential buildings and a system of irrigation canals. From the end of the fourth century BC the region became known as Margiana and was ruled by the Seleucids. A detachment of Alexander's army arrived in 328 BC, though not, it seems, the great man himself. The town was shifted to a site further south and renamed Alexandria. The Seleucid ruler Antiochos I (r. c.281–261 BC) renamed the area to the south of the Erk Kala as Gyaaur-kala (Antiochia Margiana) and surrounded it with a massive square wall and moat. At the beginning of the second century BC, Margiana fell under Parthian control and Merv was greatly expanded.

Under Parthian rule Merv was a thriving commercial centre with an operational mint – if evidence from coin finds can be relied on – from the reign of King Phraates II (r. c.138–128 BC). The Erk Kala fortress was rebuilt during the later Parthian period, possibly by Roman prisoners taken at the battle of Carrhae in 53 BC. By this time the city was the most important in Central Asia and it is mentioned in the *Geographica* of the renowned Greek scholar Strabo (c.63 BC–c.AD 21) and in the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79). Both men, perhaps obtaining their information from a common source, describe the rich soil and the city's vineyards. During the first century AD the northern areas

of the oasis were settled, a process that continued when Merv fell under Sasanian rule during the third century. The Sasanians refortified the walls and built the two hauntingly beautiful fortress palaces of Kys Kala ('Maiden's Castle') to the west of the Gyaur Kala.

The Sasanians were extremely tolerant of other religions despite their own adherence to the Zoroastrian faith. A Buddhist stupa was built in the south-east corner of the Gyaur Kala during the fourth century and was probably still in existence when Merv was lost to the Arabs in 651. Beside the stupa are the remains of a monastery (*sangharama*) of about 140 m<sup>2</sup> with some 32 rooms arranged around a central courtyard. There was also a vibrant Christian community in the town. During the fourth century, Merv, both as an outpost of the Persian Empire and as a commercial centre, was the most important city in Central Asia. Constant nomadic incursions during the fifth century threatened the city's prosperity but both trade and the construction of new buildings appear to have continued.

The Buddhist remains at Merv mark the westernmost penetration of the religion. Buddhist sculpture found at Merv was strongly influenced by that of Gandhara. A massive head of Buddha is typical: some 75 cm in height, it is made from the preferred materials of Buddhist artisans the length and breadth of the Silk Road – a mixture of clay and straw which is then painted. The head was found at the site of the stupa in the south-east corner of the Gyaur Kala, and concealed nearby was an outstanding vessel shaped like an amphora. The vessel, now housed in the Turkmenistan National Museum in Ashkabad, is painted in black, red and blue with four scenes: a man of noble appearance shown hunting, then feasting, then upon his death-bed and, finally, being mourned as he is carried to a burial mound. The ephemerality of human existence is a popular theme during this period of the Silk Road's history, hardly surprising when one considers the tumultuous events taking place at the time. The vessel may have started life as an ossuary though it had been adopted for use as a container for Buddhist manuscripts, now sadly reduced almost to dust. The painting bears a strong resemblance to Sogdian murals at Afrasiab, Penjikent and Varaksha, shown elsewhere in this book (see [Chapters 8, 9 and 10](#)).

Merv was captured by the Arabs in 651 and became the capital of Khurasan, the easternmost province of Islam. Under Arab patronage the city was expanded

to the west of the Erk Kala, in an area now known as Sultan Kala, and new structures were erected along the Majan canal. Abu Muslim, the missionary who brought the Abbasids to power during the eighth century, was chiefly responsible for the development of the Majan suburb around the canal. The mosque, government buildings and a jail were all erected at this time and the town's bazaars were also expanded as commerce flourished.

As Sultan Kala expanded, Gyaaur Kala was progressively abandoned. During the eleventh century the Seljuk sultan, Malikshah (r.1072–92), erected a protective wall around Sultan Kala, enclosing an area of about 400 hectares. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, under Seljuk domination, Merv enjoyed its greatest period of prosperity as capital of an empire that extended from the Amu Darya to the Mediterranean. It became the greatest city of the Muslim world after Baghdad and its merchants roamed far and wide. It was famous for the production of silk and cotton blankets, fruit (especially pears, grapes and melons), cheese, oil, hay, ceramics and metalwares (especially steel and copper). The pinnacle of the town's prosperity was attained during the long and illustrious reign of the great Seljuk sultan, Sanjar (r.1118–57). During Sanjar's reign the whole area became more fertile after a dam was erected on the Murghab. At its peak Merv occupied an area of 1,800 hectares and had a population of about 150,000. Sanjar's own mausoleum – its great dome visible a day's march away – still ranks among the greatest structures of the Islamic world and was the centre of the medieval city ([Figure 15](#)).

The great scholars of the day flocked to Merv during this period. Among them were the great poet and mathematician Hakim Omar Khayyam (c.1048–c.1131), who is said to have assembled his astronomical tables at the Merv observatory; and the celebrated geographer Yaqut al-Hamavi (d. c.1229). Yaqut compiled a geographical dictionary from information contained in Merv's libraries and from his own travels in Khorezm. His dictionary lists almost every town and village of the Islamic world, including many long-vanished Silk Road settlements.

Sultan Sanjar's death in 1157 marked the beginning of the end for the Seljuks. By the end of the twelfth-century Merv and all of Khurasan were under the control of the Khorezmshahs. The city's prosperity was little affected by the change but in 1221 the city faced its nemesis in the shape of the Mongols. On 25

February of that year the city fell to Genghis's youngest son Tolui. The entire population, except for about 400 artisans, was massacred and a pitiful band of survivors were also slaughtered when they attempted to return to their homes a few days later.

The city did revive: during the reign of Timur's son Sharukh (r.1405–47) a new, albeit smaller, city was established to the south of the Sultan Kala. Known today as Abdullah Khan Kala, it was a shadow of medieval Merv and the focus of Timurid power and splendour shifted to Samarkand, Shakrisabz and Herat. The town sputtered through periods of Uzbek Shaybanid and Persian Safavid domination during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but by then the merchants of the Silk Road had dwindled away.

As mentioned earlier, one of the many strands of the Silk Road to emanate from Merv led in a south-westerly direction to the frontier town of Sarakhs on the Turkmenistan–Iran border. Sarakhs has been occupied since the Achaemenid period and the remains of fortifications from both this and the Bactrian era have been found. Sarakhs became an important stopping place on the Nishapur–Merv road, situated about halfway along the arduous 12-day journey across hills and desert. The route was punctuated by a series of castles and caravanserais but centuries of invasions have ensured that few buildings remain today. A massive earthen mound just to the south of modern Sarakhs marks the site of a Seljuk-era fortress and beside it is the mausoleum of the religious leader Abu Fazl (d.1024). The latter is a rare survivor from the heyday of the Silk Road and one of the few examples of Seljuk architecture still standing in Turkmenistan. Immediately across the border from Sarakhs is the town's Iranian namesake.



**Figure 15**

Mausoleum of Sultan Sanjar at Merv, Turkmenistan. Seljuk, mid-twelfth century.

*The massive square structure in the background measures 27 m on each side and the top of its double dome is 36 m above the ground. The building's beautiful, ornate brickwork is typical of the Seljuks (see also the section on [the Khosrogerd minaret](#), near Sabzevar, Iran). The interior of Sultan Sanjar's mausoleum was once decorated with stucco mouldings and fragments still remain.*

The second road from Merv to Persia went west across the Karakum ('Black Sands') Desert to the Turkmen capital of Ashkabad. Ashkabad is a modern city – it was demolished by a massive earthquake in 1948 – but the town and its environs have played an important role in Silk Road commerce for at least two millenia. The most important of the many sites around Ashkabad is Nisa, situated about 15 km to the west of the modern city and once the capital of the Parthians.

## Nisa

Located near the village of Bagir beside the foothills of the Kopet Dag Mountains, the site consists of two parts: the fortified palace and temple complex of Old Nisa and the town of New Nisa, standing closeby. Parthian Nisa, known as Parthaunisa, was first mentioned in the journals of the eminent geographer Isidore of Charax<sup>1</sup> during the first century AD. Archeological evidence indicates that the site is much older, however. Old Nisa (Mithradatkirt) was probably founded during the second century BC by the eponymous Mithradates I (r.171–138 BC). New Nisa is just as old; it takes its name from the

fact that it survived until about the seventeenth century, whereas Old Nisa was abandoned around the third century AD when the Parthian Empire collapsed.

Old Nisa covered an area of about 14 hectares on a hilltop about 10 m above the valley. The site's defensive walls were in a five-sided configuration, punctuated by 43 rectangular towers, and were 9 m thick in places – rendering the entire fortress virtually impregnable. In the centre and southern part were religious and royal buildings with thick mud-brick walls. The South Complex contained a large square audience hall of about 20 m x 20 m, two storeys high with colossal fluted columns. In the same complex stood a round hall about 17 m across, set within a square perimeter of corridors, and a tower temple enclosed by vaulted corridors. The remains of massive clay statues of women in heavy clothing and men in armour, brightly painted and realistically modelled, were found in the square hall. They probably stood within niches in the upper tiers and represent deified members of the Arsacids, the ancient Iranian dynasty that founded and ruled the Parthian Empire. Dating to around the second century BC of the Parthian era, they can now be seen in the Turkmenistan National Museum in Ashkabad.

The northern part of Old Nisa – the North Complex – contained the 60 m x 60 m treasury (known as the Square House), consisting of a courtyard surrounded by six long rectangular rooms. The Square House was the important building of the site and, during excavations from 1948–52, extraordinary treasures were unearthed from its different chambers. Its rooms had been piled with riches and then each chamber was bricked up and sealed with an official clay stamp. Although the rooms had been entered and plundered, probably when the dynasty fell to the Sasanians in the third century AD, many of the treasures have survived. One of the rooms contained marble statues, strongly Hellenistic in style and the oldest such sculpture in Central Asia. It may provide the antecedents for the classically influenced sculpture of sites like Ai Khanum. Both complete and fragmentary marble statues were found, including a head of Aphrodite that copies the celebrated 'Aphrodite of Knidos' by the Greek master, Praxiteles (c.400–330 BC). The two finest complete sculptures are of, first, an exquisite figure, known as 'The Goddess of Nisa', who stands regally in long robes with a scarf draped across her shoulder. The second is a representation of Rodoguna, daughter of Mithradates I, in a combination of white and grey marble

(Figure 16).

A group of miniature silver-gilt figures of exceptional quality, also recovered from one of the chambers of the Square House treasury, reveals both Hellenistic and nomadic traditions. The group includes an exquisite miniature silver-gilt figure of a cherub, and dates, like the marble statuary, to the Parthian period.

One of the most important finds ever made at a Silk Road site occurred at the North Complex treasury in September 1948, only a month before Ashkabad was devastated by a massive earthquake. What at first appeared to be a pile of disintegrating ivory fragments soon turned out to be a group of more than 40 *rhyta* or *rhytons* (horn-shaped vessels for libations). The Parthian period *rhytons* were carefully excavated and then expertly restored and are now on display in both the Hermitage Museum and in Ashkabad. The ivory *rhytons* of Nisa are without peer in the ancient world. Their subject matter is the mythology of the Hellenistic realms: the gods of Olympus, centaurs, griffins and other fabulous beasts. Their surface was embellished with gold, silver and gilt-bronze and set with semi-precious stones and coloured glass. Much of the decoration and parts of the *rhytons* themselves are now lost but what remains is incomparably beautiful.

Among the more prosaic items recovered from the treasury complex were large numbers of coins bearing the town's mint mark, and a storeroom containing huge wine jars. Some 2,500 *ostraka* (inscribed tile fragments) provide a wealth of information about both Parthian housekeeping (including the distribution of the wine), and also about the chronology of dynastic rulers.

Old Nisa was a Parthian city and did not survive to the end of the empire. It became a burial ground. But New Nisa continued to be an important caravan city well into the medieval period. Mukadasi intoned on the town's beauty during the tenth century and it is reasonable to assume that its fortunes were tied to that of Merv.



**Figure 16**

White and grey marble statue of Rodoguna. Parthian, second century BC. Height 59 cm (approx.). From the Square House treasury, North Complex, Old Nisa, Turkmenistan.

*This sculpture, made from two types of marble, is one of the greatest treasures of the entire Silk Road. The subject is Aphrodite Anadyomene – ‘Aphrodite Rising from the Foam’ – better known as ‘The Birth of Venus’ and a subject handled most famously by Botticelli. She stands with her head tilted slightly forward and her arms, now missing, are raised to her hair. The tenderness of an Aphrodite is absent here, however – the face of this figure is animated and flushed with determination. According to legend, Rodoguna – daughter of the Parthian ruler Mithradates I – was washing her hair when news came that the enemy was preparing to attack. She immediately abandoned her toilette, donned her armour and led the Parthian troops into battle.*

Just east of Ashkabad, about 15 km along the road to Merv, is the town of Anau. Isidore of Charax mentions it as an important Parthian caravan city and it was known during the medieval period as Bagabad. Anau’s most famous landmark was the Dar-ul-Jemala, or Sheikh Jamaliddin Mosque, built in about

1450 and in terms of its size and beauty a rival to the great buildings of Samarkand and Bukhara. It was one of Central Asia's most cherished monuments until 1948, when the great earthquake of that year reduced it to a pile of rubble.



**Figure 17**

A Turkmen bazaar. Old photograph, taken in the early twentieth century, of what is believed to be Tolkuchka Bazaar, Ashkabad.

No one knows how long the Tolkuchka Bazaar has operated on Ashkabad's northern outskirts. The traditional age-old commodities of livestock, carpets and silk are still to be found alongside the factory produce of the region. Old photographs of the bazaar are a reminder that today's market is simply a continuation of an ancient tradition (Figure 17).

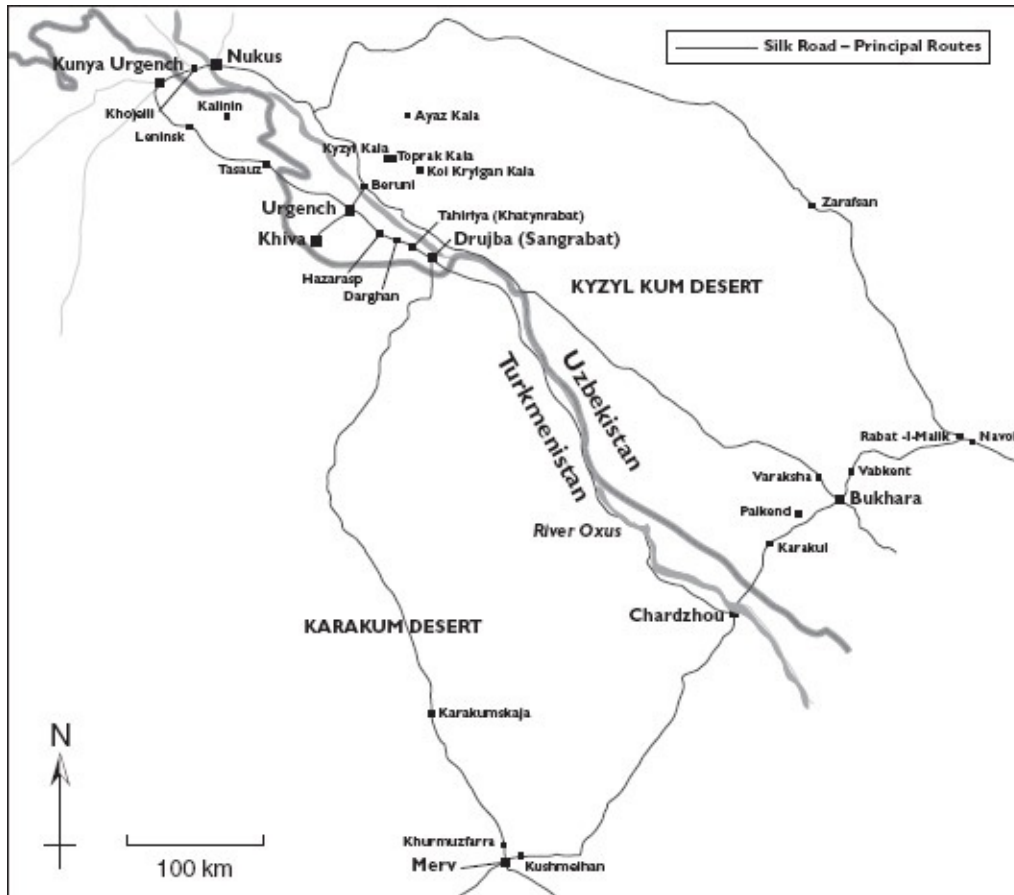
Ashkabad and its surrounding sites are the last Central Asian towns before the Iranian border. The historical and modern borders are not the same, of course, but the Kopet Dagh Mountains that run along today's frontier have always created a natural barrier between the two worlds. The road south from Nisa ran through these mountains and headed towards Masshad and Nishapur.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# The Route North from Merv to Khorezm

The last of the routes emanating from Merv is the one that leads north to Khorezm, the ancient domain of the Massagetae Scythians. The most direct, but most dangerous, route led directly across the Karakum Desert via a series of isolated caravanserais, infrequent brackish wells and the occasional nomad settlement whose inhabitants either offered shelter to travellers or robbed them – depending on their inclination at the time. One of the few large towns along this route was Khurmuzfarra, a little way north of Merv and the last place to obtain victuals before crossing the Karakum. The town flourished until the time of the Mongols when it was surrendered to the advancing sands. This route joined the Oxus close to the town of Sangrabat (modern Drujba) and then followed the river to Khiva and Kunya Urgench (Gurganj) – great cities in the land of Khorezm.

The other way, slower but less perilous, was to follow the main road from Merv to Bukhara in a north-easterly direction for about 250 km, a journey of about six days. This route passed through the fortified town of Kushmeihan with its Parthian-era citadel, noted for its excellent raisins but lost to the desert sands by the end of the twelfth century. The route joined the Oxus at Amul (modern Chardzhou), and then turned to follow the river as far as Khorezm. Lack of water and fodder for animals were perennial problems, and a series of fortified caravanserais built along the way provided only a partial solution. Some researchers report that it is still possible to pick out the old caravan trails from lines of greenery, stretching out across the desert where pack animals have left their droppings and fertilised the parched soil.



**MAP 5**

The route from Merv to Khorezm.

The road beside the Oxus followed the river's lower bank because a system of irrigation channels had created a narrow tract of cultivable land extending for hundreds of kilometres to the north and south of Amul, located precariously between the Kyzyl Kum ('Red Sands') Desert to the north and the Karakum (Black Sands) Desert to the south. Amul, or Chardzhou (meaning 'crossroads'), is just that: an ancient river crossing and a place where two important strands of the Silk Road intersected. The road through this tract was served by a series of evenly spaced *rabats* (caravanserais) – some fortified and some not – many of which eventually grew into towns. At Sangrabad the road joins the other route to Khorezm and at Tahiriya (Khatynrabad) – its caravanserai thought to have been erected by the Tahirids during the ninth century – travellers entered the land of Khorezm.

### **The Towns of Khorezm**

Two days beyond Khatynrabat was Darghan, which, during the tenth century, was the second largest town in Khorezm after Kunya Urgench. Darghan was famous for its gilded and jewel-encrusted mosque and its 500 vineyards that extended for more than 10 km along the riverbank. Raisins produced in these vineyards were exported along the Silk Road. Three or four days beyond Darghan, after passing through the town of Hazarasp, travellers arrived at Khiva. Before we examine Khiva, brief mention should be made of the town of Kath, located a day away on the right bank of the Oxus and once the capital of Khorezm. Abu Raihan Al-Biruni described the town in the late tenth century, referring to the palace of the Khorezmshahs – visible from a distance of 15 km – and a clay and brick-built citadel with triple walls called al-Fir. Not long afterwards the citadel collapsed into the river and the old part of the town was abandoned. Mukadasi visited the town at about the same time and relates that, ‘the town is constantly flooded by the river, and the inhabitants are moving (farther and farther) away from the bank’. He also notes the piles of refuse in the streets. Al-Biruni describes the capture and death of the last ruler of the Afrighid dynasty of Khorezm in 995. The new rulers of Khorezm established their capital at Gurganj and Kath faded into obscurity.

On the opposite bank of the river to Kath the town of Khiva, 30 km south-west of Urgench,<sup>1</sup> was undergoing a metamorphosis from pleasant provincial town to major Silk Road city.

### *Khiva*

Despite its undeniable beauty and its deserved status as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, all but a handful of the city’s buildings date to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, long after the Silk Road had ceased to play an important role in global commerce. Archeological excavations during the 1970s and 1980s suggest that the town is 2,500 years old, but for much of its early history it was little more than a small settlement on the caravan routes from Persia – a tiny oasis flanked by the limitless wastes of the Karakum and Kyzyl Kum deserts. Merchants would stop to drink at the Kheiwak Well, still in existence in the north-western corner of the Ichan Kala – the old inner town or *shahrستان*.

After the death of the last Afrighid ruler in 995, Khorezm was forcibly unified by the Khorezmshah Mam’un. When Mam’un died in 1017, control of

Khorezm fell to the Ghaznavids, masters of Transoxiana until their defeat by the Seljuks in 1040. During this brief period of time, from 995–1040, Khiva flourished as never before. The town's ceramics, glass and metalwares were second to none and a network of irrigation canals, or *ariks*, kept the desert at bay.

Under the Khorezmshah Takash (r.1172–1200) and his son Muhammad (r.1200–20), Khorezmian territory was expanded to include Khurasan and the former Ghurid domains in Afghanistan. The Khorezmian capital during these years was at Gurganj but Khiva also benefited from Silk Road trade and the city expanded beyond the walls of the Ichan Kala. The Mongols arrived in 1220 and Khiva did not escape. The walls of the Ichan Kala appear to have been torn down and the area within became a burial ground. It did not revive until the fourteenth century, when the Ichan Kala's necropolis was filled in and the city's potters began to produce again. Under the Timurids Khiva revived further and the walls of the Ichan Kala were rebuilt. By the sixteenth century the old capitals of Kath and Gurganj had dwindled away as a result of devastation by both the Mongols and the armies of Timur. The population of Khorezm, reduced and weakened by these attacks, was unable to maintain the network of irrigation canals and the region suffered from alternate floods and drought. The population shifted eastwards and, by the seventeenth century, Khiva emerged as the principal town of Khorezm, capital of the newly named Khivan Khanate of the Uzbeks. By this time, however, the Silk Road was little more than a memory and Khiva became a rather sinister provincial town, lost among the desert wastes – a refuge for slavers and brigands.

The remarkable buildings we see in today's Khiva were built mainly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and are therefore well beyond the scope of this book. Among the few structures to survive from the pre-Mongol and Mongol eras are fragments of the city walls, the Tomb of Sayid Allauddin and some of the wooden pillars of the Jame (Friday) Mosque.

Khiva's suburbs, the Dishan Kala, were enclosed by walls of about 10 km in length. The *shahristan* or inner town – the Ichan Kala – was also enclosed by walls, although these were thicker and up to 8 m in height. Most of the Ichan Kala's walls still stand, 2.1 km in extent and punctuated every 30 m or so by colossal round towers. On each side, at the points of the compass, are huge gates.

The walls of both the Dishan Kala and Ichan Kala have been rebuilt many times but they still provide a sense of how the ancient town may have appeared (Figure 18).



**Figure 18**

The east walls of the Ichan Kala, Khiva, Uzbekistan. The inner walls date back to the nineteenth century and earlier.

The Tomb of Sayid Allaiddin, in the central part of the Ichan Kala, is the oldest surviving original building in Khiva. It was built as two chambers – a mausoleum and an attached mosque – and is renowned for its beautiful majolica decoration. Sayid Allaiddin was a Sufic master who died in 1302 and, according to an inscription, his mausoleum was erected by his pupil and successor Emir Kulyal (d.1370).

The Jame (Friday) Mosque, at the dead centre of the Ichan Kala, was erected between 1788 and 1799 on top of earlier ruins. The roof of the mosque's main hall has openings to let in light and air and the 213 wooden pillars that support it, each about 3 m in height, are frequently bathed in sunlight. The columns of the Jame Mosque date from the tenth to eighteenth century and are carved with great skill. The motifs that cover them are floral and geometric, and the many Qur'anic references are in Kufic on the early pillars and Arabic on the later ones. At least four of the columns date to the tenth century, probably salvaged from

the city of Kath after it was inundated by the Oxus. Many others date from the twelfth to fourteenth century and may have come from Gurganj.

### *Gurganj*

‘Seven times destroyed and seven times rebuilt’ is the legend attached to Gurganj, successor to Kath as the capital of Khorezm. Gurganj is the name given to the town by the Mongols but the Arabs called it Jurjaniya and, after 1646, it was known as Kunya Urgench (‘Old Urgench’).

There is archeological evidence that the site has been occupied since about the sixth century BC. Topographical research at the site indicates that during its heyday – from the tenth to fourteenth century – it covered an area as large as 1,000 hectares, making it one of the largest cities in Asia. The late tenth to the early eleventh century was, after Khorezm had been unified by the Khorezmshah Mam’un, a time of wealth and splendour for the inhabitants of Gurganj. Under royal patronage the great scholars of the day formed the ‘Court Academy’, located, it is believed, atop the Kyrk Molla (‘Forty Mullahs Hill’) in the north-east part of the town. The hill is now a cemetery and has never been fully excavated but we know something of the men who frequented the academy. The peerless astronomer and philosopher Avicenna (980–1037) was one of them. Another was Avicenna’s contemporary Al-Biruni (973–1048), one of the most remarkable scholars and scientists of the ancient Islamic world.

### *Al-Biruni: Scholar and Scientist*

Abu Raihan Al-Biruni was born in Khiva, in present-day Uzbekistan, but moved to what is now Afghanistan in about 1017. He accompanied his patron, King Mahmud of Ghazni, on his military campaigns around India, travelling for a period of 20 years. During his journeys he mastered Hindu philosophy and religion, mathematics and geography and was conversant in Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Turkish and Hebrew. Al-Biruni’s magnum opus, *The History of India (Ta’rikh al-Hind)*, was the principal source of information about the country for the following 600 years. His accomplishments include theories about the earth’s rotation on its axis, hydrostatic laws of physics, and the notion that the Indus valley had once been a sea basin. He also examined the phenomena of creation

and what happens to the soul after death.

Al-Biruni is known to have corresponded with the great philosopher Ibn Sina (Avicenna). He was also renowned for his pithy remarks. When he was asked, for example, why scholars always flock to the doors of the rich, while the rich are not inclined to call at the doors of scholars, he retorted: 'The scholars are well aware of the use of money, but the rich are ignorant of the nobility of science' (quoted in A. L. Mackay, 1994).

It was Mahmud of Ghazni who caused the demise of the Gurganj academy. In 1017 he demanded that it be transferred to his capital at Ghazni in Afghanistan. Al-Biruni complied and followed Mahmud for the next two decades, but Avicenna fled to Persia, eventually settling in Hamadan.

Much of the Khorezmians' economic prosperity appears to have been built upon trade with nomadic Turks, but the Baghdad Caliphate and the Chinese court were also recipients of the region's products. There was also a thriving trade with the territory to the north and west of the Caspian – known as Khazaria. The tenth-century geographer Mukadasi has left a detailed list of the commodities traded by the merchants of Khorezm. He mentions trade with the kingdom of Bulghar, or Bulgaria, on the Volga – the source of many of the Khorezmian's most valuable commodities, which were subsequently sold on at a profit:

sables, miniver, ermines, and the fur of steppe foxes, martens, foxes, beavers, spotted hares, and goats; also wax, arrows, birch bark, high fur caps, fish glue, fish teeth [probably walrus tusks], castoreum [a musky secretion from the scent glands of a beaver, used as a fixative in perfume and incense], amber, prepared horse hides, honey, hazel nuts, falcons, swords, armour, khalanj wood, Slavonic slaves, sheep, and cattle. All these came from Bulghar.

Locally produced commodities included:

grapes, many raisins, almond pastry, sesame, fabrics of striped cloth, carpets, blanket cloth, satin for royal gifts, coverings of *mulham* fabric, locks, Aranj fabrics [a type of cotton], bows which only the strongest could bend, *rakhbin* [a kind of cheese], yeast, fish, boats (the latter also exported from Tirmidh) [Termez].

(Mukadasi, c.985. Quoted in Barthold, 1981)

One other commodity is mentioned from the century preceding Mukadasi – watermelons so succulent that they were packed into lead containers lined with snow and conveyed to the caliphs of Baghdad. If it survived the journey intact, a

single melon was worth 700 dirhams – equivalent to more than 2 kg of silver!

The Ghaznavids' domination of Transoxiana was brief. The Seljuks defeated them in 1040 and for the next 150 years Gurganj languished as something of a backwater. Under the Khorezmshah Takash (r.1172–1200) and his son Muhammad (r.1200–20), the city was, for a fleeting moment, once again capital of a great empire. The renowned geographer Yaqut al-Hamavi (d. c.1229) lived in Gurganj from 1219–20 and thought it one of the most beautiful cities of the Islamic world: 'There is hardly a town in the world comparable to the capital of Khorezm for its riches and metropolitan grandeur, its number of inhabitants, and its proximity to wealth and fulfilment of religious aspirations and regulations' (Yaqut al-Hamavi. Quoted in Knobloch, 1972).

But Muhammad, 'the knight errant', was undone by hubris. When his relative, the governor of Otrar, ordered the slaughter of a trade mission sent by Genghis Khan, the Mongol demanded that the governor be handed over for retribution. Muhammad refused and Gurganj was doomed. The Mongols arrived at the end of the year 1220 with a force exceeding 100,000 men. The siege began with a small force appearing before the city gates to drive off the Khorezmians' cattle. The defenders gave chase but were lured into an ambush near the city, losing 1,000 men before sunset. The noose around Gurganj was quickly tightened. Before long the Mongols were using their catapults to fire sections from the trunks of mulberry trees, hardened by soaking in water, into the town. Their choice of projectile soon changed to baskets of burning naphtha and the town began to burn. One commenator reported that the Oxus was diverted away from the town in order to accelerate the conflagration – but the Mongols also suffered setbacks. An attempt to build a bridge across the Oxus ended with the Khorezmians surrounding a force of 3,000 Mongols and killing them all. Rashid al-Din reported that the bones of slaughtered Mongols formed hillocks around the city and other commentators reported arguments between Jochi and Chagatai. The former promised mercy to the defenders if they surrendered, but in the end it was the more bellicose views of Chagatai that prevailed. Ata-Malik Juvaini says that 100,000 artisans were spared and carried off to work in the Mongols' eastern domains. Young women and infants were also spared, but the rest were divided up into groups of 24 and put to the sword, each group dispatched by one Mongol. If Rashid al-Din's report that there were 50,000

Mongols present at the conclusion of the siege is accurate, then 120,000 Khorezmians were massacred in one day. Forty Mullahs Hill (Kyrk Molla), once the site of the great court academy of the Khorezmshah Mam'un, was the highest point of refuge in the stricken city. The bones of the defenders still lie scattered about the base of the hill (see [Figure 13](#)). The Mongols' final act was to destroy the dam that protected the town from the Oxus. What remained of old Gurganj was submerged by the waters of the river. Juvaini wrote: 'Khorezm became the abode of the jackal and the haunt of the owl and the kite.'

Despite its utter destruction, within 100 years Gurganj had risen from the ashes and the catalyst was Silk Road trade. By the early fourteenth century, Gurganj had been rebuilt to serve the caravans travelling to the Golden Horde territory in the Volga region. Ibn Battuta described newly revived Gurganj as a vigorous commercial centre, 'the largest, greatest, most beautiful and most important city of the Turks, shaking under the weight of its populations, with bazaars so crowded that it was difficult to pass'. The handful of buildings that still stand in Gurganj date mostly to this period – the Sultan Takash Mausoleum and the Fakhr-ad-din Razi (or Il Arslan) Mausoleum both date to the late twelfth or early thirteenth century and are the only structures at Gurganj to survive relatively intact from the pre-Mongol, Khorezmshah era. Sultan Takash (r.1172–1200) was one of the greatest of the Khorezmshah rulers. His 18 m high, blue-domed mausoleum is said to mirror the shape of nomadic tents.

There are a number of buildings from the immediate post-Mongol period. The Turabeg Khanum Mausoleum is located in the northern part of the town and is thought to have been built around 1370 for the Sufi dynasty, rulers of Khorezm until 1388. The building is also said to be connected with Turabeg, the wife of Kutlug Timur, Mongol governor of Khorezm, and is one of Central Asia's most perfect architectural masterpieces. The entrance portal is 25 m high and leads to an inner chamber topped by a dome, the underside of which is decorated in tilework with 365 geometric designs, each representing a day of the week. These designs on the inner dome resemble stars, and the calendar theme is continued with the 24 windows that sit beneath the dome representing the hours in a day, four small windows lower down the weeks in a month, and four further windows the seasons.

The tottering Kutlug Timur Minaret (visible in [Figure 19](#)) was erected around

1320 and, at 64 m, is the tallest such minaret in Central Asia. Age and seismic activity have left it in a precarious state. Aside from the minaret and the other buildings described above, there is a shattered fortress (the Ak Kala), the portal of a caravanserai and a few rebuilt mausolea.



**Figure 19**

Overall view of the ruins of Gurganj (Kunya Urgench), former capital of Khorezm, now in Turkmenistan. The Sultan Takash Mausoleum is visible to the left.

Continuing caravan trade during the second half of the fourteenth century ensured that Gurganj remained prosperous but the growing political and economic power of the Sufi Khorezmshahs attracted the attention of Emperor Timur. In 1372, 1379, and again in 1388, Timur campaigned against the Sufi rulers of Khorezm. Gurganj was besieged in 1379 and was sacked after the Sufi khan tossed a gift of melons presented by Timur into the moat. In 1388 the Sufi khan rebelled again and this time Timur left nothing to chance. The city was levelled and barley sown on the site. Gurganj's fortunes never fully revived and it was reduced to little more than a rest stop on the caravan trails. A fifteenth century visitor, Ibn Arabshah (d.1450) lamented the decline of the Silk Road in Khorezm:

There used to advance convoys of travellers from Khorezm, making the journey in wagons as far as the Crimea, securely and without fear, a journey of about three months [...] But now through these places from Khorezm to the Crimea nothing moves or rests and nothing ranges there, but the antelopes and the camels.

(Ibn Arabshah. Quoted in Knobloch, 1972)

The Elizabethan merchant Anthony Jenkinson saw the town in 1558 and described its buildings as, 'ruined and out of good order' and, when the Oxus changed its course during the seventeenth century, the town was finally abandoned and the capital transferred to Khiva. Today, the site is a vast necropolis. From the day that the city was finally abandoned, local people have followed time-honoured practice and gradually taken over the ruins for use as a graveyard. There can be no more fitting an end for a city afflicted, over so long a period, with so much death and devastation.

### **The Castles of Khorezm**

A network of *kala* (fortified settlements) is strung out across the Kyzyl Kum Desert. They were all built to a similar plan – enclosed by a double set of defensive walls with lookout towers and firing points for archers. The largest and best known is Toprak Kala, about 45 km north-east of Urgench across the Amu Darya.

#### *Toprak Kala*

Toprak Kala is believed to have served as Khorezm's capital from about the second to sixth or seventh century, during which time it appears to have been part of the Kushan Empire. The site was first excavated in 1938 but has been examined many times since and the richness of the artefacts found at the site suggests that it was an important and prosperous town, deriving its wealth from Silk Road commerce. A Zoroastrian temple and a palace have been identified, both on raised platforms. The palace contained a series of great halls containing murals and large clay sculptures. The Hall of Kings, some 280 m<sup>2</sup> in area, contained larger than life-size clay statues of the Khorezmian kings and their consorts. These sculptures (now in the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg) are in typically Kushan style and are strongly influenced by the Hellenistic world. A smaller fortress, Kyzyl Kala, stands just to the west of Toprak Kala and is of similar date.

Among the other fortified remains of Khorezm are Ayaz Kala, about 60 km north-east of Toprak Kala; and Koi Krylgan Kala, 30 km to the south-east. Koi Krylgan Kala ('The Fort of the Dead Rams') comprises a temple and mausoleum dating back to the third or fourth century BC. The central structure is a two-storey

round tower, about 10 m high and 45 m in diameter, and is thought to have served as a mausoleum for one of the Khorezmian kings. The tower is also thought to have been used to store funerary objects for the performance of dynastic rites; and as an observatory. It is surrounded at a distance of 15 m by a concentric, circular fortress wall. In the second century BC the settlement was looted and burned but the ruins were subsequently reinhabited and the town lingered on until the second or third century AD.

By the seventh century, the Kushan Empire had fallen to the Hephthalites and, when the security of merchants could no longer be guaranteed, the Khorezmian trade routes withered away. Beginning at the end of the seventh century the Arab general Qutaiba systematically reduced the towns of Khorezm, and many of its intelligentsia fled to the region north and west of the Caspian controlled by the Khazars. The Khazars were a Turkic people who originated in Central Asia. They originally held shamanistic beliefs but later adopted Judaism, Islam and Christianity, learned Hebrew and Slavic, and settled in the cities and towns of the northern Caucasus and Ukraine. The Khazar Empire attained its apogee during the ninth and tenth centuries when it was one of the most important trading powers of the Silk Road. The Khazars were the founders of the Ukrainian city of Kiev, and Khazaria controlled much of the trade between China, Central Asia and Europe. The Khazars traded silks, furs, candle wax, honey, jewellery, silverware, coins and spices, engaging in direct commerce with Khorezm (by now firmly under the control of the Arabs), Volga Bulgharia and with port cities in Azerbaijan and Persia. Khazaria was overthrown in the tenth century by the Rus' Khanate and control of Silk Road commerce in the Caucasus fell to the new power.

### *The Oxus and the Aral Sea*

At length upon the lone Chorasmian shore  
He paused, a wide and melancholy waste  
Of putrid marshes.

(Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude')

The Elizabethan merchant Anthony Jenkinson passed through Khorezm in 1558–9. His remarks about the region's fragile water supply now seem especially prescient:

The water that serueth all that Countrey is drawn by diches out of the riuer Oxus, vnto the great destruction of the said riuer, for which cause it falleth not into the Caspian sea as it hath done in times past, and in short time all that lande is like to be destroyed, and to become a wilderness for want of water, when the riuer of Oxus shall faile.

(Anthony Jenkinson, 1558. Quoted in Knobloch, 1972)

According to the observations of early geographers, the Aral Sea was on the periphery of the area traversed by the Khorezmian section of the Silk Road and marked the limit of expansion for many of the empires that held sway in Central Asia. There was a route skirting north of the Caspian Sea to Khazaria but most merchants headed south-west to Persia or crossed the Caspian by boat. The only settlement of note on the southern shore was Khalijan, a collection of huts at the point at which the Oxus flowed into the sea. Fish caught from the Aral's slightly brackish waters were a Silk Road commodity and were exported far and wide. The Aral's waters were a rich source of fish until the 1960s when the great inland ocean – once the fourth largest in the world – fell victim to the worst environmental catastrophe of the twentieth century. Overuse of the waters of the Oxus (Amu Darya) and Jaxartes (Syr Darya) rivers for irrigating the vast cotton fields of the former Soviet Union reduced the flow into the Aral Sea to such an extent that it began to dry up. By 2007 it had shrunk to 10 per cent of its original volume and split into four lakes – the North Aral Sea, the two basins of the South Aral Sea and a small lake between north and south. By 2009 the south-eastern basin had disappeared and the south-western lake had been reduced to a thin strip. As the waters recede, chemicals that have accumulated from years of pesticide use are blowing into the atmosphere – causing horrific levels of cancer, respiratory diseases and birth defects among the local populace. The town of Moynaq, once the largest fishing port on the Aral, is now 100 km from the shore<sup>2</sup> and has become a cruel travesty of itself (Figure 20).

All the fish and most of the animals that were sustained by the South Aral Sea have disappeared. A dam built by the Kazakh government in 2005 has led to partial recovery of water levels and fish stocks in the North Aral Sea but plans to save the South Aral Sea – such as building a canal or pipeline from the Caspian – have so far come to nothing and it is almost certainly doomed.

### **The End of Khorezm as a Trading Power**

By the first half of the fourteenth century all of Khorezm lay in ruins. Ibn Battuta

remarked that in the whole distance between Gurganj and Bukhara there was but one populated spot – Kath, the much-depleted former capital. This was far from the end of its misery, however. During Timur’s three campaigns against the recalcitrant Sufi rulers of Khorezm, he tore a swathe through the region and what remained resembled the trail of a tornado. Ruined cities still dot the banks of the Oxus, many fit only for use as graveyards. The towns of Mizdarkhan and Yusup Ishan, near Khojeili, are a testament to the destructive power of Timur’s armies. Mizdarkhan was once almost as large as Gurganj and was renowned for its decorative tilework. Timur reduced it to rubble.



**Figure 20**

The ships' graveyard. Beached trawlers at Moynaq, Uzbekistan, formerly on the Aral Sea.

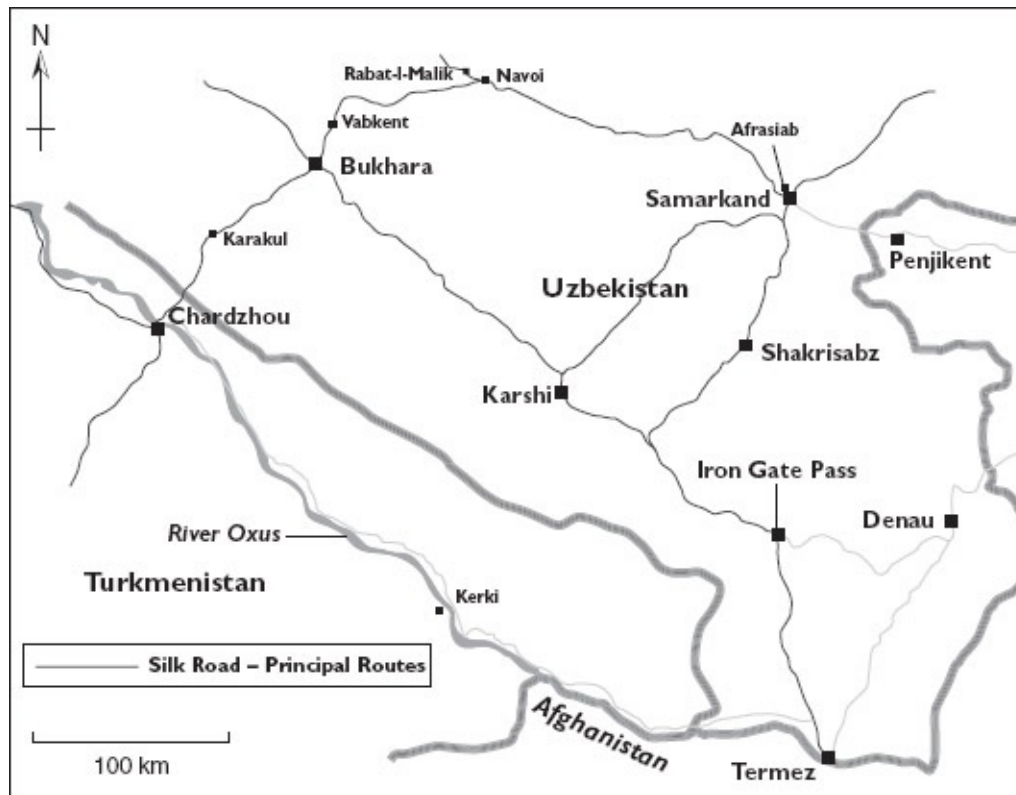
In the centuries after Timur, Khorezm continued, periodically, to play a role in trade (particularly trans-Caspian commerce), first with the Golden Horde and in later years with the Russians. It was never again to play a role in international dealings between China and the West. The years immediately after Timur's death were a time of decline and introspection for the once-great trading powers of the Silk Road. The Byzantine Empire fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, and China, its sovereignty newly restored by the Ming, effectively closed its borders to the outside world. Khorezm became a backwater, and so it remained until the late nineteenth century when Czarist Russia and Britain began to contest the

Great Game and attention, once again, focused on the region.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# The Routes North from the Iron Gate Pass

The three principal routes beyond the Iron Gate all originate in the town of Karshi, the ancient Sogdian city of Nakhshab (called Nesef by the Arabs). The north-westwardly route was a section of the main, ten or 11-day, Balkh–Bukhara road, and Karshi was an important oasis town upon it. There were also two roads to the north-east; the first a direct but steeper route along the lower bank of the Kashka Darya River, across the Zerafshan Mountains through Shakhrisabz (Kesh) and via the Takhtakaracha Pass to Samarkand. The other route from Karshi led through the Jam Pass and along foothills straight to Samarkand. The second was longer but was less precipitous and therefore easier for caravans to follow.



**MAP 6**

The routes north from the Iron Gate Pass.

Karshi's position on the main Balkh–Bukhara road made certain that it experienced periods of both prosperity and perdition. Arab geographers of the medieval period describe it as a large urban centre on the Kashka Darya. The oldest part of the town was at Yorkurgan, about 10 km to the west of modern Karshi and occupied from at least the sixth century BC. By the third century AD Yorkurgan was one of the largest cities in the region, its centre dominated by massive twin temples. It was destroyed during the Sasanian conquests of the third to fourth century but was resurrected during the seventh to eighth as the Arab city of Naksheb. During this period Karshi was said to have had a citadel of more than 30 m in height. Karshi's heyday was during the ninth to thirteenth centuries when it became one of the most important towns on this part of the Silk Road and was famed for its vineyards. The whole area fell under Mongol control in 1220 and the valley in which Karshi sits was designated as pasture land for the nomads' horses. The modern town emerged during the early fourteenth century and took the name of Karshi ('Palace') when the Mongol Kabak Khan built a luxurious residence there. Even during the Timurid era

Karshi remained an important caravan city on the road south to Balkh and India.

At the end of the road to the north-west of Karshi was Bukhara, one of the legendary cities of the Silk Road.

## Bukhara

Irrigation of the lower Zerafshan valley during the first millennium BC resulted in the rapid growth of population centres. Bukhara, sitting as it does at the crossroads of east–west and north–south trade routes, was an immediate beneficiary of this growth. By about 500 BC it was already an important centre, defended by a citadel that has stood in one form or other ever since. Today it is the site of the Ark Fortress, residence of the former emirs of Bukhara and the old *shahristan* (the inner town around it) occupied an area of about 13 hectares to the east. During the seventh century AD the city fell under the control of the Bukhar-Khudats, the Ark was expanded, and the city walls extended to enclose the main residential area. In the early eighth century the city covered a square of as much as 55 hectares containing bazaars, workshops and places of worship for Nestorians, Buddhists, Manichaeans and Zoroastrians.

In 673 the Arab armies crossed the Oxus and threatened the city. They were successfully bought off with the payment of tribute and the town did not fall under full Arab control until 709 when it was taken by the great general, Qutaiba. During the next century-and-a-half the city was the scene of frequent revolts by the Sogdians and local Turks against the forces of Islam but it continued to expand. By the middle of the ninth century a double ring of walls encircled the city and most of its inhabitants had embraced the new religion, aided in part by the offering of financial incentives to attend the city's mosques.

In 892 the city was chosen as the capital of the semi-autonomous Samanid dynasty by its founder, Ismail ibn Ahmed (r.892–907). Under the Samanids the city flourished as a centre of learning. Scientists and craftsmen flocked to the city, drawn by the promise of Samanid patronage. The Ark was completely enclosed by high walls, and a palace, said to be the most beautiful in the Islamic world, was built near the Registan Square. Workshops were established to manufacture commodities for export along the Silk Road. A contemporary visitor, the geographer Mukadasi who saw the town during the late tenth century, lists the town's merchandise: 'soft fabrics, prayer carpets, woven fabrics for covering the floors of inns, copper lamps, Tabari tissues, horse girths (which are woven in places of detention), Ushmuni [Egyptian] fabrics, grease, sheepskins, oil for anointing the head' (Mukadasi, c.985. Quoted in Barthold, 1981).

The mausoleum of Ismail Samanid, the founder of the dynasty, dates to the beginning of the tenth century and is the only Samanid structure extant in Bukhara and one of the earliest examples of Islamic architecture in all of Central Asia (Figure 21). That it exists at all, given the depredations the city suffered at the hands of the Kharakhanids, the Mongols and many other invaders, is little short of miraculous.

Among the scholars to profit from the beneficence of the Samanids were the poets, who wrote their verse in both Arabic and Persian. The best of the former was Ismail Bukhari (810–70), a native of the town who compiled a volume of some 600,000 sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (*hadiths*). He also wrote verse:



**Figure 21**

Mausoleum of Ismail Samanid (r.892–907), Bukhara, Uzbekistan.

*This mausoleum, one of the most celebrated buildings in the whole of the Islamic world, is traditionally thought to have been constructed by Ismail Samani for his father, but Ismail himself and his grandson Nasr II were also interred there. Its ornamental brickwork resembles basketry and owes many of its features to the pre-Islamic architecture of the Sogdians. The dome, 9.25 m in diameter, is supported by squinches – arches that span each corner of a square building. The squinch was probably invented by the Sasanians and, in later centuries, made possible the construction of great buildings like Istanbul’s Blue Mosque and St Paul’s Cathedral in London.*

As Samarkand is called the Beauty of the Earth, So Bukhara is the pillar of Islam and the Muslim hearth.  
(Ismail Bukhari. Quoted in Kirichenko, 1997a)

Among the poets who wrote in Persian, Abu Abdullah Rudaki (c.859–941)

stands supreme. His poetry has a wistful quality that seems to make the centuries fall away: The Ju-yi Mulian we call to mind,

We long for those dear friends long left behind.  
The sands of Oxus, toilsome though they be,  
Beneath my feet were soft as silk to me.  
Glad at the friend's return, the Oxus deep  
Up to our girths in laughing waves shall leap.  
Long live Bukhara! Be thou of good cheer!  
Joyous towards thee hasteth our Amir!  
The moon's the prince, Bukhara is the sky; O Sky, the Moon shall light thee by and by!  
Bukhara is the Mead, the Cypress he;  
Receive at last, O Mead, thy Cypress tree!

(Rudaki, 'Ju-yi Muliyan'. Translated by A. J. Arberry in Arberry, 1954)<sup>1</sup>

Among the celebrated viziers of Samanid Bukhara were the tenth-century historian Nukh Ibn Mansur and a colossus of world history: the peerless Avicenna.

## **Ibn Sina or Avicenna**

Abu Ali al-Hussain Ibn Abdallah Ibn Sina (Latinised name, 'Avicenna') was born in AD 980 in Afshona, 25 km from Bukhara. The Avicenna Museum at Afshona has a modern bronze bust showing the great man's face, recreated from his skull after it was disinterred from his tomb in Hamadan in Iran. Ibn Sina, known in the West as Avicenna, was the most famous physician, philosopher, encyclopaedist, mathematician and astronomer of his time. His early education took place in Bukhara and, by the age of ten, he was already said to be conversant with the entire contents of the Qur'an and with a number of sciences. He became interested in Greek and Islamic philosophy under the guidance of his teacher, Abu Abdallah Natili, and quickly established a reputation as a gifted physician. During the early period of Ibn Sina's study he developed dual convictions – the first that even the best teaching provides only a hint of the problems one must face when dealing with a subject, and the second that solving the remaining problems depends on the intelligence of the individual. Ibn Sina summarises this notion with the remark, 'the heart of learning is a direct insight into the rational principles on which the world is constructed'. At the age of 17 Ibn Sina cured the Samanid prince, Nooh Ibn Mansoor of Bukhara, of a life-threatening illness when all of the court physicians had given up hope. Declining the prince's offer of a reward, he requested only that he be granted access to the court library. The opportunity for the peoples of the Silk Road to access the wisdom of other nations was, without doubt, one of its most important characteristics. Ibn Sina's first sight of the royal library was both a defining moment in his life and his first opportunity to partake of that wisdom: I found there many rooms filled with books which were arranged in cases, row upon row. One room was allotted to works of Arabic philology and poetry, another to jurisprudence and so forth, the books of each particular science having a room to themselves. I inspected the catalogue of ancient Greek authors; I saw in this collection books of which few people have heard even the names, and which I myself have never seen either before or since.

(Ibn Sina. Quoted in Lawton, 1991)

The culmination of his early education came at the age of 20, when Ibn Sina

produced a 20-volume appraisal of the philosophical sciences as a whole, under the title *Sum and Substance*. After his father's death in 1012 Ibn Sina left Bukhara with Abu Sahl, a friend and fellow scholar, in the direction of Jurjan – a kingdom on the south-east coast of the Caspian Sea and the latter's homeland. En route, Abu Sahl died in a desert sandstorm but Ibn Sina survived and was eventually welcomed at Gurganj (Kunya Urgench) by Prince Qabus ibn Vushmagir, an ally of the Khorezmshah and a supporter of the Samanids. At Gurganj he is also believed to have met the celebrated mathematician and geographer Abu Raihan Al-Biruni (973–1048).

Ibn Sina subsequently moved to Hamadan, in Persia, where he wrote his greatest work *Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb*, known simply as the 'Canon' in the West and the most important medical reference ever written. The *Qanun* extends to over a million words and is a survey of the entire extent of medical knowledge during the eleventh century, drawing from both ancient and Islamic sources. The text also includes Ibn Sina's original ideas on such diverse subjects as the contagious nature of tuberculosis, the spread of diseases by water and soil, and the interaction between psychology and health. He describes the therapeutic effects of no fewer than 760 drugs, discusses anatomy, gynaecology and child health, and was the first to detail the intricate workings of the human eye and of the function of the aorta to control the flow of blood to and from the heart. The *Qanun* was translated into Latin by Gerard of Cremona during the twelfth century and became the standard textbook for European medical schools for the next 500 years. Both Latin and Hebrew editions were printed in large numbers and, even as late as the sixteenth century, it was reissued more than 20 times.

Ibn Sina's second great work, also completed during his sojourn in Hamadan, was his philosophical treatise *Kitab al-Shifa* ('The Book of Healing'). The book is a vast undertaking, covering a wide spectrum of knowledge from philosophy to science, and his contributions to the fields of mathematics, geology, metaphysics, ethics, economics and politics were centuries ahead of their time and are virtually unparalleled in history. His philosophy is a synthesis of Aristotelian tradition, Neoplatonic<sup>2</sup> influences and Muslim theology.

In *Kitab al-Shifa* Ibn Sina also contributed to the fields of physics, astronomy and music. In physics he studied the phenomena of heat and light, including the observation that the speed of light must be finite; he also investigated specific

gravity and the thermometer. In the field of music he studied harmonies and the ear's detection of sounds.

From Hamadan, Ibn Sina journeyed to Isfahan and it was here that he spent his final years as scientific adviser and physician to the ruler. The exertions of constant travel and the political upheavals in the region during this period damaged his health; he died during a military campaign in AD 1037, apparently from colic.

Like his contemporary Al-Biruni, Ibn Sina was a master of the pithy remark: 'The world is divided into men who have wit and no religion and men who have religion and no wit.' His ideas are among the most precious of all of the Silk Road's commodities.

\*

Many of Bukhara's greatest monuments were constructed during the Kharakhanid era (992–1211). The walls of the inner residential area were rebuilt and the Ark was strengthened with terracotta bricks. The Kalan Mosque and minaret and the main portal of the Magok-I-Attari ('Tomb of Attari') Mosque were all built during the first half of the twelfth century ([Figure 22](#)).

The Kalan ('large' or 'high') minaret and mosque were originally constructed in 1121–2, during the reign of the Kharakhanid ruler Arslan Khan Muhammad (r.1102–29). The minaret collapsed soon after it was built, destroying a large section of the mosque as it fell. Both structures were rebuilt during Arslan Khan Muhammad's lifetime and the minaret has survived until today. It stands almost 50 m in height, is built of baked bricks upon an octagonal base, and so impressed was Genghis Khan with the tower that he is said to have ordered that it be spared when the city was pillaged in 1220. The Kalan Mosque was also rebuilt but it did not survive the fires that swept through the city when it was taken by the Mongols. The mosque that now stands on the spot where Genghis is said to have berated the city's faithful was completed during the sixteenth century.



**Figure 22**

The Kalan Complex, Bukhara, Uzbekistan. The minaret dates to c.1127.

The Magok-I-Attari (‘the recessed mosque of the perfumers’) is one of the city’s most ancient and fascinating buildings. Its foundations stand below the level of the surrounding land in the centre of Bukhara on a spot that excavations suggest has been used as a place of worship for as many as 2,000 years. During the tenth century a building known as the Mokh Mosque was erected on the site of a Zoroastrian fire-temple, itself raised over an earlier Buddhist temple. It was not long before the Mokh Mosque was destroyed by fire and, during the twelfth century, a new mosque was erected in its place of which the southern portal still survives (Figure 23). The eastern entrance and dome were added during the sixteenth century but the southern portal contains a mixture of quarter columns (a style inherited from the pre-Islamic Sogdian era), patterned brick decoration, and glazed and unglazed tiles.

In 1141 Bukhara fell to the Kharakhitai, although the members of the city’s ruling clan – the Sadrs, or Burkhanids – were permitted to retain power. The city enjoyed a brief spell of independence and prosperity despite continuing raids by

Turkish nomads. In 1207 Shah Muhammad of Khorezm, the new ruler of Transoxiana, seized the town. Shah Muhammad reinforced the citadel and began civic works, but they were no more than castles built on sand. In 1220 the whole of Central Asia was convulsed by the Mongol invasions and the city was sacked and virtually destroyed by a fire that broke out as it was pillaged. Those citizens not massacred by the Mongols were taken into slavery and when Ibn Battuta saw the town a century later he remarked that, 'all but a few of its mosques, academies and bazaars are now lying in ruins'.



**Figure 23**

Southern portal, Magok-I-Attari ('Tomb of Attari') Mosque, Bukhara, Uzbekistan. Twelfth century.

Bukhara was rebuilt under the Timurids but it was never again a match for the effulgence of Samarkand. The buildings erected during the following centuries were more often religious than commercial and the city's role changed progressively from Silk Road entrepôt to spiritual centre. The city's covered bazaars and many of its great mosques and *madrassahs* were built during the sixteenth century, when it became the capital of the Uzbek Shaybanid Khanate. At the time it was said that there were as many places of worship as there were days of the year. The old city walls were also rebuilt and gates erected, one or

two of which still stand today. In fact, most of Bukhara's 13 km long walls were intact until 1920, when they were destroyed by Bolshevik shellfire. There used to be an ancient, crumbling caravanserai beside the Ulugh Beg Madrassah in Bukhara. The space it occupied is now a public square but the caravanserai can still be seen in old photographs.

Bukhara has remained an important religious centre right up to the present day but its commercial significance has declined – with the opening up of the sea-lanes to Europe and the closure of China's borders under the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the east–west trade routes and the towns that sat on those routes withered away.

## Silk Road Sites Around Bukhara

### *Paikend*

About 60 km and a day's journey south-west of Bukhara is the old transit station of Paikend. Called the 'copper city' or the 'city of the merchants', Paikend is even older than Bukhara and sat on the main Silk Road between Samarkand and Merv. Each village in the region owned an individual caravanserai (*rabat*) near the town, from which they conducted trade with China. There was even maritime, trans-Caspian commerce with the lands to the west. Until the mid-ninth century there were more than 1,000 such caravanserais, many garrisoned with men to prevent attacks by marauding Turks. When the region fell to the Samanids the threat was removed and the *rabats* fell into disuse. During the eleventh century the Zerafshan River appears to have changed its course and Paikend's inhabitants began to abandon the town.

Early in the twelfth century the Kharakhanid ruler Arslan Khan Muhammad (r.1102–29) attempted to restore Paikend to its former glory but his plans to cut a water channel through the hill on which the town was built came to nothing and the town faded slowly into obscurity.

### *Varaksha*

Excavations at Varaksha in the Bukhara oasis have revealed the remains of a Sogdian city dating to about the fifth to eighth century. The remains of the one-time residence of the Bhukar-Khudats are situated in the Kyzyl Kum ('Red Sands') Desert, about 40 km north-west of Bukhara on the old road to Khorezm. The ruins occupy a triangular site of about 9 hectares and appear to have flourished from the fifth to the tenth century, although other remains dating back to the first century BC have also been found. An area around Varaksha of about 12 km<sup>2</sup> shows signs of widespread cultivation – including a network of irrigation canals. Varaksha was the last stop on the caravan route before merchants embarked on the seven-or eight-day crossing of the Kyzyl Kum to Khorezm, and was a major economic centre. During the fifth and sixth centuries the site was occupied by the Hephthalites and a citadel was constructed from rammed earth. Beside the citadel was the palace of the Bhukar-Khudats, built in the

architectural style of the Sogdians at Afrasiab (Samarkand) and Penjikent. Within the palace Soviet archeologists discovered three large rooms – the Red Room, the East Room and the West Room – all decorated with wall paintings in Sogdian style but with recognisable influences from India. Winged griffins and leopards are shown in combat with splendidly dressed, princely figures on elephant-back. The richness of the murals suggests that the inhabitants of Varaksha were enjoying a period of great economic prosperity. These paintings can now be seen in the Central Asia section of the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg.

Like many of the great cities of the Silk Road, Varaksha's glory days were brief. In about 784 the Bukhar-Khudat ruler Buniat was beheaded in the royal palace for fomenting dissent against the Arabs. The town did not die with Buniat and was still an important commercial centre in the twelfth century, but by then the focus of trade had shifted to Bukhara and the area had reverted to desert by the time of the Mongol conquests. Today, the ruins lie forlorn and forgotten, strewn with pottery shards and partly submerged by the sands of the Kyzyl Kum.

## CHAPTER NINE

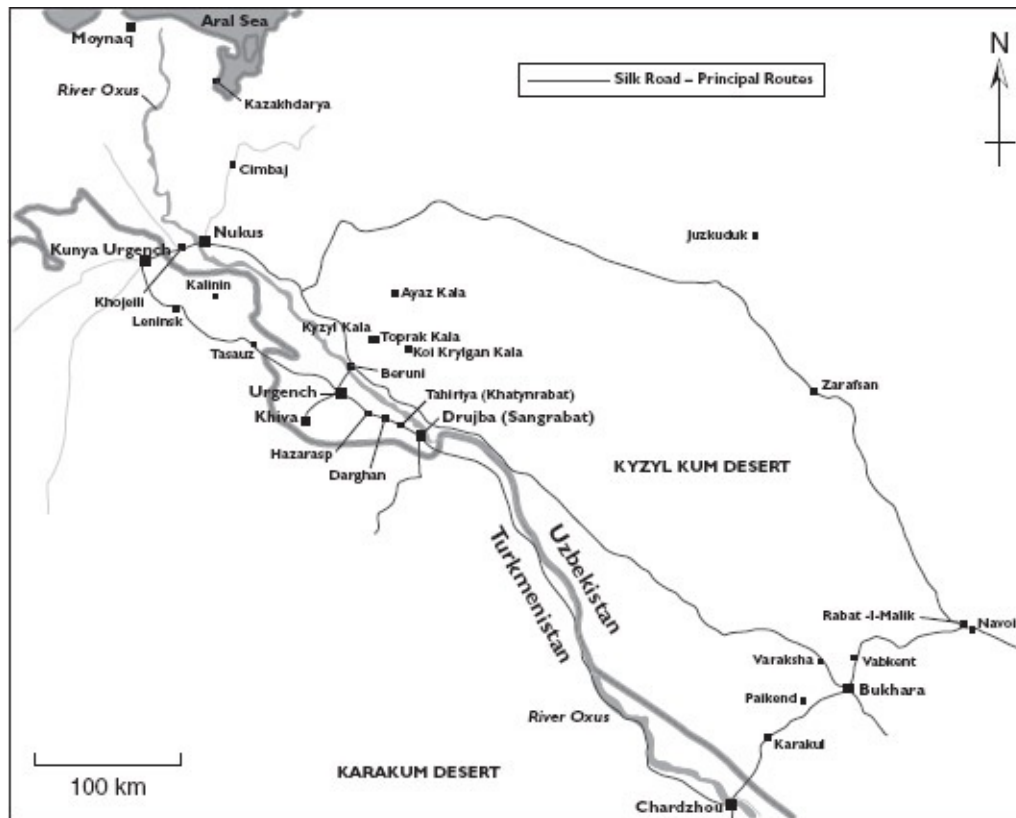
The Routes to the North-West from Bukhara to Khorezm There were three principal routes from Bukhara to Khorezm. The longest, but probably the safest, was to head south-west through Paikend to the town of Amul (modern Chardzhou) on the Amu Darya. The route then followed the lower (west) bank of the river through a narrow strip of irrigated, and therefore relatively fertile, land between two deserts. There were two principal northerly routes (and probably some minor trails as well), both more direct but with a perilous crossing of the Kyzyl Kum Desert with no assured supply of water or food.

Both routes ran north of the Amu

Darya, a journey of at least eight days through a series of widely spaced caravanserais. Some of the caravan stops were so far apart that travellers were forced to journey for a day and a night to reach the next stop on the route.

#### **The Royal Road from Bukhara to Samarkand**

The journey from Bukhara to Samarkand took six or seven days and, at least as early as the Kharakhanid era (992–1211), the highway between the two cities came to be called the Royal Road (the *Shah Rah*). This road followed the course of the Zerafshan River for almost 300 km and is part of the main east–west section of the Silk Road from China. The Kharakhanids built a network of caravanserais along the road and the towns between Bukhara and Samarkand flourished. A tall, slender minaret still stands at Vabkent, 25 km from Bukhara on the Royal Road. It was built in 1196–7, only 70 years after the Kalan Minaret and, at almost 39 m, is almost as impressive. Further out across the arid steppe that divides the two cities, about 70 km east of Bukhara, is Rabat-I-Malik ([Figure 24](#)), one of the most massive and imposing of all of the Silk Road’s myriad caravanserais:



## MAP 7

The routes to the north-west from Bukhara to Khorezm.

Think, in this battered Caravanserai  
Whose Portals are alternate Night and Day,  
How Sultan after Sultan with his Pomp  
Abode his destined Hour, and went his way.

They say the Lion and the Lizard keep  
The Courts where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep:  
And Bahrām, that great Hunter – the Wild Ass  
Stamps o’er his Head, but cannot break his Sleep.’

(Edward Fitzgerald (1809–83),  
‘The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam of Nishapur’)

## **The Sogdians**

The men who trudged along the Royal Road during the Kharakhanid period were continuing a tradition established by those most consummate of Silk Road traders, a people of Persian stock known collectively as the Sogdians. Little is known about them; they could never have been said to constitute a nation or empire, they were more of a loosely affiliated group of city-states. What is not in doubt, however, is that they possessed great commercial prowess: evidence of the activities of Sogdian merchants have been found at many places and over a wide area of the Silk Road. They seemed to have travelled anywhere and everywhere in search of profit, and traces of them are still to be found – in the documents and murals of Xinjiang, in the petroglyphs at Chilas in northern Pakistan and in the poems and stories of Tang dynasty Xian. By the second century AD they played a key role in Silk Road trade in both directions – the Chinese bought jade, precious stones, exotic animals and slaves from Sogdian merchants, and the countries to the west purchased the silks, mirrors and weapons that they acquired in China. There were colonies of Sogdian merchants in many Chinese towns and they carried their religion and customs with them as they travelled. The Sogdian language became the Silk Road's *lingua franca* and, from the second century until they were subjugated by the Arabs during the eighth century, Sogdian cities were centres of cultural excellence. Every work of art that the Sogdians produced – their paintings, their metalwork, their textiles, their sculpture and even their grave artefacts – are flamboyant expressions of wealth and power, acquired from Silk Road trade. The great Sogdian cities of Varaksha, Afrasiab (Samarkand) and Penjikent are all examined in this book and all reveal astonishing levels of artistic skill.



**Figure 24**

The Rabat-I-Malik Caravanserai, near Navoi, Uzbekistan. Kharakhanid era, tenth or eleventh century.

*The Rabat-I-Malik Caravanserai ('The Prince's Caravanserai') – near Navoi and the old Silk Road town of Karmana (ancient Karminia) – was built before 1078 by the Kharakhanids. Old photographs of Rabat-I-Malik show large sections of wall and half-columns still intact but after years of 'brick-mining' by locals only the massive front portal remains. Since this photograph was taken, the portal has been restored and a new retaining wall erected around the site.*

Excavation of the Sogdian burial grounds at Orlat, situated on dry sections of the Saghanaq riverbed to the north-west of Samarkand, have revealed much about their burial practices and their fondness for hunting and jousting. The Sogdian dead were either exposed on towers – their flesh stripped by vultures or dogs before the bones were placed in ossuary caskets – or they were interred in pits or catacombs. At Orlat they were interred and, despite the fact that many graves were looted in antiquity, many artefacts remain. Weapons, ceramics and bone belt buckles were found in a total of ten burial mounds and some, like a jade scabbard slide from China, were of foreign manufacture. The bone belt plaques are all superbly worked with themes that are strangely reminiscent of the European knights of medieval times.<sup>1</sup>

By the early eighth century the Sogdians were finished as an economic and

political force in Central Asia. They and Divastich, the last ruler of Penjikent, fled the city with the Arabs in pursuit. They sought refuge at Mount Mugh in modern Tajikistan but were eventually overrun and slaughtered in 722. This was not the end of the Sogdians, however. During the 1930s, Soviet researchers discovered that the inhabitants of several villages in the remote Yagnob valley of northern Tajikistan still spoke the ancient language of the Sogdians. More than 1,000 years after they disappeared from the Central Asian stage, these precious few descendants of the men who helped to sustain the Silk Road during its most vibrant years are still to be found in the mountains of Tajikistan. The modern descendants of the Sogdians, it is said, are the Tajiks but, as with so much of Central Asia history, the subject is a matter of fierce debate.

## Samarkand

Sweet to ride forth at evening from the wells  
When shadows pass gigantic on the sand,  
And softly through the silence beat the bells  
Along the golden road to Samarkand.  
We travel not for the trafficking alone;  
By hotter winds our fiery hearts are fanned  
We make *the golden journey to Samarkand*.

(James Elroy Flecker (1884–1915), ‘The Golden Journey to Samarkand’) Of all the cities that make up the long journey to the West, few possess as much magic and mystique as Samarkand. Michael Shoemaker, a visitor during the early 1900s (Shoemaker, 1904), said that it was ‘the home of all the romance and poetry in the East’ and for 2,500 years it successfully maintained its position as the richest and most populous metropolis on the Central Asian Silk Road.

Samarkand sits on the southern bank of the Zerafshan River and to the north-east of the modern town is Afrasiab, a hilly area covering about 220 hectares and the site of the most ancient parts of the city. Samarkand is believed to have been an outpost of the Persian Achaemenid Empire and was already a large fortified city when the armies of Alexander the Great arrived in 329 BC. It was here, at Maracanda as it was known to the Greeks, that Alexander ran through his boyhood friend Cleitus with a spear. Both men had engaged in a drunken argument and Cleitus had claimed that Alexander’s accomplishments palled against those of his father, Philip of Macedonia. Under Greek rule the city’s fortifications were strengthened and the city developed around the Afrasiab site. At Afrasiab the Greeks built great palaces, markets and a network of irrigation canals. The water-supply system was further improved during the Kushan era (first century BC to fourth century AD) by the construction of a lead aqueduct. Under Kushan rule the city’s Sogdian inhabitants began to explore trading possibilities with the lands to the east and west. By the third century there were communities of Sogdian merchants along the entire eastern section of the Silk Road, and Samarkand, as Sogdiana’s capital, became a rich, cosmopolitan city. The arrival of Hephthalite (Hunnish) invaders during the fourth and fifth centuries caused trade to falter and the city to contract but by the sixth century the former Hephthalite domains were ruled by an alliance of Turks and Sasanians and it flourished once again. The Sogdians produced great works of art, influenced to some degree by all of the countries with whom they traded. The artists of Byzantium, China, India and Persia have all left their mark on Sogdian art, by

direct involvement or by the diffusion of motifs and methods along the Silk Road.

Among the celebrated Sogdian murals at Afrasiab is a depiction of visiting ambassadors at the royal court in Samarkand. This painting dates to the seventh century and comes from the south wall of Room 1. This and the other murals at Afrasiab adorned the walls of the ruler's palace and the houses of his nobles. They were installed at the museum in the exact arrangement in which they were discovered. In this celebrated and richly painted mural, members of the Chaghanian mission are seen visiting the court of the Sogdian ruler, Vargoman. An inscription on the painting refers to the visit of ambassadors from Chaghanian (the area around the Surkhan Darya valley near modern Denau) and Chach (modern Tashkent). Leading the procession is a princess seated beneath a canopy upon a white elephant, the accompanying inscription suggesting that she is destined to marry the Sogdian ruler. Her entourage, on camelback and on horseback, brings gifts for the ruler including a flock of sacred swans. The Chaghanian ambassador himself, lavishly dressed, holds aloft his official mace as he approaches on horseback.<sup>2</sup>

Vargoman can be seen on the west wall receiving ambassadors from China and Korea, as well as a party of mountain-dwellers, each envoy carrying gifts for the great man. On the eastern wall is the most delightful scene of all: a Chinese princess makes her way across a river aboard a large red boat, accompanied by her servants and a group of musicians who serenade her as she journeys to the Sogdian court. This mural also dates from the seventh century and comes from the north wall of Room 1. There appear to be traces of a mythical animal resembling a dragon beneath the boat.

The strange Hepthalite<sup>3</sup> belief that an artificially deformed head was a symbol of high social status, achieved by binding the head during infancy, can also be seen among the ossuary contents of the Afrasiab Museum ([Figure 25](#)).

Like so many of the great civilisations of the Silk Road, Sogdiana seems to have withered almost as soon as it bloomed. When the Chinese monk Xuanzang passed through in 630 the town was thriving, 'the merchandise of many countries was found and the craftsmanship of artisans appeared superior to that of other countries', he observed. But in 712 Samarkand fell to the Arab armies of General Qutaiba ibn Muslim. The main Zoroastrian temple of the Sogdians was

immediately replaced by a mosque and a section of the city's protective wall was taken down. At the Battle of the Talas River in 751 the victorious Arabs brought captured Chinese paper-makers – and possibly silk-weavers too – to Samarkand, and a local industry became established. Within a short space of time Samarkand paper was renowned throughout the Islamic world but the upheavals occurring throughout Central Asia during the eighth century, and the campaigns against the Sogdians, adversely affected trade. The fortunes of Samarkand and its merchants did not fully revive until the ninth century when it became part of the Samanid domains. A new citadel was constructed and the city walls were rebuilt with a gate at each of the four points of the compass. A large commercial district also developed to the south and west of Afrasiab and the merchant classes, many as converts-of-convenience to the new religion, began to grow rich once again. The tenth-century geographer Mukadasi listed Samarkand's export goods during the Samanid era as 'silver-coloured fabrics (*simgun*), [...] large copper vessels, artistic goblets, tents, stirrups, bridle-heads, and straps' (quoted in Barthold, 1981).



**Figure 25**

Sogdian clay ossuary and deformed skulls. Seventh–eighth century.

Over the next 300 years control of the city changed hands a number of times but it continued to thrive as a commercial centre. Under the Kharakhanids (992–1211) Afrasiab was rebuilt as an administrative and military base and its main mosque enlarged – but the city was doomed. In 1220 it was attacked by the Mongols, its defenders cornered in Afrasiab's mosque and slaughtered. The

Mongols then proceeded to tear down the city's aqueduct and Afrasiab was abandoned for all time. Samarkand's population fell to less than a quarter of its original number and, at the time of Ibn Battuta's visit during the first half of the fourteenth century, the city had still not been fully rebuilt: I journeyed to Samarqand, which is one of the largest and most perfectly beautiful cities in the world. It is built on the bank of a river where the inhabitants promenade after the afternoon prayer. There were formerly great palaces along the bank, but most of them are in ruins, as also is much of the city itself, and it has no walls or gates.

(Ibn Battuta. Translated by H. A. R. Gibb in Ibn Battuta, 1929) Paradoxically, the city's glittering age occurred during the final years of the Silk Road. The Samarkand of the Timurids was capital of a vast empire, and a series of grandiose construction projects caused the city to take on a form that can still be seen today. Walls of 7 km in length were built around the town, now positioned to the south of old Afrasiab, and a citadel built in the western part of the city to contain Timur's residence and treasury – the Kok-Saray, or 'Blue Palace'. During the late fourteenth and the first few years of the fifteenth century, Timur embarked on a veritable orgy of construction in Samarkand with the help of craftsmen brought from the conquered territories. Within the newly rebuilt walls he installed six gates with roads leading from each to the Registan Square – in Timur's day the city's central point, covered by a domed bazaar. Samarkand's population was large – about 150,000, according to Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo, representative of King Henry III of Castile – and included Turks, Arabs, Moors, Greeks, Armenians and Indians. There was a strong contingent of Christians, too – Catholics and Nestorians among them – and the Registan Square and the surrounding markets were filled with goods from the countries of the Silk Road: The markets of Samarqand further are amply stored with merchandise imported from distant and foreign countries. From Russia and Tartary come leathers and linens, from Cathay come silk stuffs that are the finest in the whole world, and of these the best are those that are plain without embroideries. Thence too is brought musk which is found in no other land but Cathay, with balas rubies and diamonds which are more frequently to be met with in those parts than elsewhere, also pearls, lastly rhubarb with many other spiceries. The goods that are imported to Samarqand from Cathay indeed are of the richest and most precious of all those brought thither from foreign parts, for the craftsmen of Cathay are reputed to be the most skilful by far beyond those of any other nation [...] From India there are brought to Samarqand the lesser spiceries, which indeed are the most costly of the kind, such as nutmegs and cloves and mace with cinnamon both in the flower and as bark, with ginger and manna: all these with many other kinds that are never to be found in the markets of Alexandria.

(Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo. Translated by Guy Le Strange in Clavijo, 1928) During the rule of Timur's grandson, Ulugh Beg, the Registan Square began to be transformed from a commercial space to a place of worship and for the study of Islam. The three *madrassahs* (seminary colleges) that make up the Registan ensemble together constitute one of the wonders of the Islamic world and became the model for the civic projects of the Safavids of Persia and the Mughals of India. The British Member of Parliament (MP) and future viceroy of India, George Curzon, saw the Registan during the 1880s and called it 'the noblest public square in the world'. It still presents a dazzling sight ([Figure 26](#)).

One of the few surviving early Timurid structures is the Gur-e Mir ('The Grave of the Prince') ([Figure 27](#)). Timur commissioned the building for a

favourite – his grandson and heir Muhammad Sultan – who died campaigning in 1404. A year later, Muhammad was joined by the great man himself and during the following years other princes were placed there too – the assassinated Ulugh Beg among them. Timur lies at the feet of his religious mentor Mir Sayid Barakah and at *his* feet lies Ulugh Beg.

Timur's progeny are reposed around him beneath marble tombstones and his own cenotaph, a massive 1.8 m slab of dark green jade which is said to be the largest piece of the material in the world. The jade slab over Timur's grave was damaged in 1740 during an attempt by the Persian invader Nadir Shah to steal it. The actual tombs are in a crypt beneath the chamber, positioned exactly beneath the cenotaphs above. The building is topped by an ovoid ribbed dome, more than 30 m in height and covered with radiant blue tiles.

Another of Samarkand's earliest and most important monuments has a funerary role. The Shah-I Zindah necropolis was built on the southern slopes of Afrasiab Hill over a period of almost 900 years, from the eleventh to the nineteenth century. It developed around the tomb of Qutham ibn al-Abbas, a cousin and companion of the Prophet who was with the first Arab armies in Transoxiana and died at Samarkand in about 677. The legend is that Qutham ibn al-Abbas (in Persian, Shah-I Zindah or the 'living king') was decapitated by the city's Sogdian defenders and jumped with his head into a nearby well. There he is said to remain until his services are required, and he will re-emerge as the defender of Islam. The necropolis was abandoned after the Mongol conquest of 1220 but was subsequently rebuilt during the fourteenth century by Timur. A series of 16 small mosques and domed mausolea were built along a narrow lane of about 70 m in length as a burial place for the clergy of Samarkand and for Timur's family and friends. The mausolea in the lower section were, for the most part, built by Ulugh Beg, and the buildings as a whole reveal the evolution of architecture and glazed tile decoration during the Timurid era.



**Figure 26**

The Registan Square, Samarkand, Uzbekistan. Fifteenth to seventeenth century.

*The oldest of the three structures (visible to the left) is the Ulugh Beg madrasah, built around 1420. The massive front portal is flanked by a pair of minarets and is decorated with marble panels around the base, and blue, green, turquoise and yellow tiles and mosaic work above. Across the square is the Shir Dar ('lion bearing') madrasah, built by the city's Uzbek governor, Yalangtush Bakhadur between 1619 and 1636. It is a perfect mirror in style and composition of the Ulugh Beg madrasah but is embellished with even more startling decoration of brick and tile mosaic work. At the top of the front portal, in each corner, are the creatures from which the building takes its name – large felines, more like tigers than lions, hunting white deer and on the backs of each of them a rising sun with a human face. These motifs, extraordinary given the traditional Muslim dislike for figurative art, have been the subject of much debate and may be a manifestation of the power of the rulers of the day. The third of the Registan's structures is the Tela Kari ('Gold Work') madrasah, built just after the Shir Dar madrasah, between 1646 and 1660. The Tela Kari madrasah is the largest of the three and was built to replace the structurally flawed Bibi Khanum Mosque (see [Figure 28](#)). The interior of its azure coloured dome is decorated with richly painted and gilded papier-mâché.*

The Bibi Khanum Mosque is one of the most majestic edifices to have survived from Timur's reign. Its construction was begun in 1399 when Timur returned to Samarkand, fresh from his triumphs in India. The mosque was built as the city's main place of worship and was dedicated to Timur's favourite wife, Sarai Mulk ('Bibi') Khanum, a Mongolian princess of monumental beauty. A Timurid manuscript, the *Zafarnama* of Sharaf al-Din, describes the construction of the building. Some 500 stonemasons from Azerbaijan, Persia, Syria and India laboured on the massive structure, creating a building 130 m x 100 m. A total of 95 elephants were brought from India to Samarkand to convey building

materials, and its dome, according to Sharaf al-Din, ‘would rank supreme were it not for the sky itself’. Timur personally supervised, and often meddled in, the construction of the mosque. According to Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo the ailing Timur was carried each day to the site and threw the workers coins and gobbets of meat to urge them on. The result was stupendous but it was built too quickly and began, almost immediately, to shed large chunks of masonry, often during worship. The passing years reduced the building to a virtual ruin and an 1897 earthquake left only a tottering wreck of a building, the courtyard around it and a massive marble Qur’an lectern. The courtyard became a cotton market, and so it remained until an ambitious Soviet restoration project resurrected the building during the 1960s and 1970s. Today, some of its former glory is restored and the contrast with its former state could not be more marked (Figure 28).



**Figure 27**

The Gur-e Mir, Samarkand, Uzbekistan.

*Originally completed in 1404 (during the Timurid period), the Gur-e Mir has been extensively rebuilt and restored over the past decade. The entrance gate to the left of this photograph is a new structure and much of the tilework on the façade is replaced.*



**Figure 28**

Bibi Khanum Mosque, Samarkand, Uzbekistan. The mosque was completed in 1404–5. This photograph is dated around 1910.

Beside the Bibi Khanum Mosque is Samarkand's bazaar, a focus for the city's commerce for aeons. There is a degree of post-Soviet drabness about the bazaar today but the spice-sellers, so admired by Clavijo, are still to be found.

There is space to look at only one other of the city's architectural treasures from the Silk Road era. Timur's grandson and heir, Ulugh Beg, was renowned more for his erudition than for his military exploits. As governor of Samarkand he invited the most eminent scholars of the day to the city, including the renowned Turkish astronomer Qazi Zadeh Rumi. Under Qazi Zadeh Rumi's tutelage astronomy became Ulugh Beg's greatest passion and in 1420 he ordered the construction of an observatory on top of a hill in the north-east corner of the city. He and his fellow astronomers identified the coordinates of 1,018 stars and calculated the length of a calendar year to within a minute of today's measurement. Ulugh Beg's calculations travelled east and west along the Silk Road and were used by Chinese, Arab and European scholars at least until the seventeenth century. In 1447 he became ruler of all Transoxiana, ruling from Samarkand, but his interest in science was regarded as heretical in some quarters

and in 1449 he was assassinated. The observatory was demolished after Ulugh Beg's death and its whereabouts remained unknown until 1908 when the foundations of the building and an 11 m section of a marble sextant were discovered by the Russian archeologist Vladamir Vyatkin. The sextant is in near-perfect condition with marks showing the degrees and minutes still visible along its polished surface.

# CHAPTER TEN

# Silk Road Sites Around Samarkand

Aside from Samarkand, some of Timur's mightiest structures were erected in the city of his birth – Shakhrisabz, 90 km to the south on the Termez-Samarkand section of the Silk Road. This route led across the Zerafshan Mountains and passed through the Takhtakaracha Pass, and though steep and somewhat difficult for caravans it was the most direct route between the two cities.

## Shakhrisabz

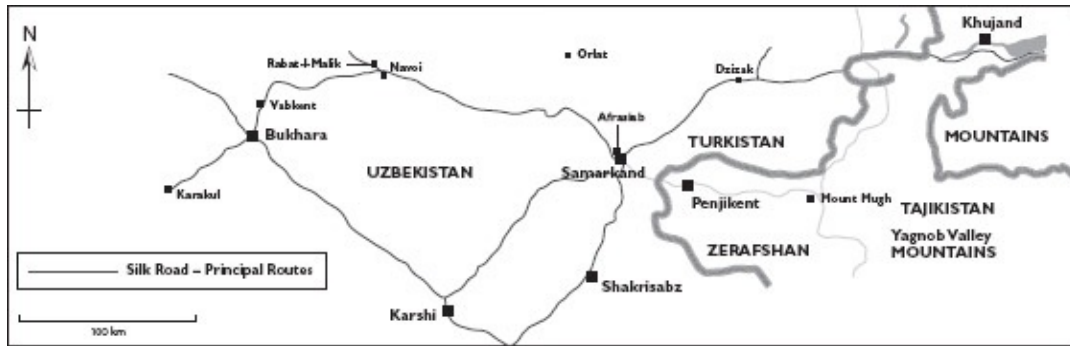
Shakhrisabz, known as the ‘Green City’, was called Kesh during the Sogdian era and was renowned for the fertility of its soil and for its mild climate. Until Timur was born there in 1336 the city was a small and unassuming place, known chiefly for the quality of its fruit. Under Timur’s administration the city was transformed, however, and though much of what he built was demolished during the sixteenth century by the Shaibanid emir of Bukhara, there is enough remaining to reveal its former grandeur. Timur’s palace, the Ak Serai (‘White Palace’), was begun in 1379 and was still being worked on when Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo saw it in 1404 ([Figure 29](#)). The entrance was 22 m wide and 40–50 m in height. Beyond this massive portal was Timur’s great reception hall, covered in gold and blue tiles so beautiful, according to Ambassador Clavijo, that ‘even the craftsmen of Paris, who are so noted for their skill, would hold that which is done here to be of very fine workmanship’ (1928). Babur, the last scion of the Timurids and the first emperor of the Mughal dynasty, was equally impressed. In his memoirs (the *Baburnama*) he wrote that ‘Few arches so fine can be shown in the world’ (Babur, 1921). The whole structure was built of fired brick and decorated with polychrome tiles and mosaic work. Only the two towers of the main portal (*pishtaq*) still stand today, each with huge Kufic inscriptions proclaiming the might of Timur: ‘The Sultan is the shadow of God.’ At the top of the portal, incomplete but still decipherable, is a mantra for the Timurid age that reads: ‘Let he who doubts our power and munificence, look upon our buildings.’



**Figure 29**

The entrance towers of the Ak Serai ('White Palace'), Shakhrisabz, Uzbekistan. Timurid period, late fourteenth century.

A short distance to the south of the Ak Serai is the Dar as-Siyadat ('Palace of Power'), the mausoleum of the Barlas clan of which Timur and his descendants were members. Only the northern part survives today but the complex once comprised a mosque, a *madrassah* (theological college) and dynastic tombs. One of them was built for Timur himself but in the event he was interred in Samarkand and the marble sarcophagus that had been prepared for him remained empty. The sole surviving above-ground tomb is that of Jehangir – Timur's oldest son – who died in 1376 at the age of only 22, after falling from a horse.



**MAP 8**

Silk Road sites around Samarkand.

Just to the west of the Dar as-Siyadat is the beautiful Kok Gumbaz Mosque, named for its blue dome and built in 1435 by Ulugh Beg as the town's main place of worship. Across a small square from the mosque is a burial complex – the Dar as-Tilovat ('Palace of Respect and Consideration') – begun by Timur and expanded by Ulugh Beg as another place of final repose for members of the family.

### **Penjikent (Bunjikath)**

Another of the Silk Road cities within striking distance of Samarkand is Penjikent (Bunjikath), about 65 km to the east along the Zerafshan River in modern Tajikistan. Penjikent developed on a plateau above the river and flourished from the fifth to the eighth century as the most eastern city of Sogdiana, although the town dates back much further. The site has been thoroughly investigated since 1946 and was found to cover a total area of 13.5 hectares, about 8 hectares of which were already in existence by the fifth century. It consisted of a fortified city (*shahristan*), a citadel and a necropolis. Most of the inhabitants were Zoroastrians, but Buddhist and Nestorian Christian remains have also been discovered. The city received a large influx of Sogdian aristocracy in around 712 when Samarkand fell to the Arab armies of General Qutaiba, and this may explain why there is an abundance of wall paintings and wooden sculpture of such true brilliance. Excavations at Penjikent have exposed a residential area of streets crammed with several hundred, two-and three-storey clay and mud-brick houses (each with numerous rooms), as well as shops and workshops. A third of the houses were found to contain rich murals and exquisite woodcarvings in large numbers, making Penjikent one of the most

important sites of the entire Silk Road. In 722 Penjikent's ruler, Divastich, revolted against the growing power of the Arabs in Central Asia. The city was attacked and burned and Divastich was pursued to Mount Mugh, about 130 km to the east, where he was eventually captured and put to death. As a result the Sogdian inhabitants of Penjikent abandoned the city until about 740, when a peace treaty enticed them to return and begin to rebuild it. The charred remains of Divastich's palace were replaced by barracks, presumably for the Arab conquerors, but the city's renewed period of vigour was a brief one – it was abandoned for good in about 780.

The murals<sup>1</sup> adorning the clay walls of Penjikent's aristocracy date mostly to the first half of the eighth century. The subject matter is truly remarkable and reveals influences from both Iran and India. Episodes from the Persian epic *Rustam*, lavish banquets, scenes from an Indian epic in which a Brahmin (a Hindu priest) plays dice with a ruler, and some of Aesop's *Fables* are a few examples of the subject matter of these paintings. The so-called 'Blue Hall', named for the blue lapis background of its murals, contained some of the best examples and most are now in the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg. The links to the paintings of Varaksha and Afrasiab are numerous, and immediately apparent, but there are connections, too, with the murals of Fondukistan and Kizil.<sup>2</sup>

One of the most engaging is from a Zoroastrian temple of seventh century date and shows a group of female *Fravashis* – protector spirits somewhat akin to the Western notion of 'guardian angels'. In this mural – now in the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg – a group of elegant dressed *Fravashis* are depicted, jewelled and crowned and holding aloft banners with birds or crescent moons on their tops. In their hands they hold maces with animal heads.

In contrast to the monumental bas-reliefs of the Sasanian rulers of Persia, Sogdian aristocrats portrayed themselves neither as gods nor as giants among ordinary men. In their paintings they surround themselves with the heroes of mythology – the intention, it seems, was for the owner of the house to assimilate the qualities of these men and to acquire merit by association with them. The mural depicting the valorous Rustam, from Penjikent's Blue Hall, was originally 12 m long and shows the hero of medieval Persian literature in combat with demons. The origins of the *Rustam* epic are lost in antiquity but many of the

events are set out in the great Persian text, ‘The Epic of Kings’ (*Shanama*) by the tenth-century poet Ferdosi. Penjikent’s murals mirror the exploits set out in Ferdosi’s literary cycle; the hero gallops about on a chestnut horse, ‘his skin [...] bright and dappled as though flecked with petals of red roses on saffron’,<sup>3</sup> slaying demons and fighting dragons. In one much-quoted passage from the *Shanama*, Ferdosi describes the decoration of a mythical palace in the illustrious city of Siyavush-gird. The words were written almost 300 years after the last of Penjikent’s murals were created, but the description is an apt one: A city famous for its rosaries,

Its lofty palaces, and orchard-grounds.

He limned [painted] within the hall full many a picture Of kings, of battle, and of banqueting.

(Ferdosi, *The Epic of Kings: The Shanama*. Quoted in Yarshater, 1983) The wooden sculptures and murals from Penjikent show evidence of the conflagration that engulfed the city in 722: the former are badly charred and the latter are in pieces. The destruction of Divastich’s palace was so thorough that only small fragments of murals survive but among them are some quite beautiful examples of Sogdian art. A

fragment of a mural with a depiction of a siege engine (*manjaniq*) still survives in the Hermitage Museum, recovered from the east wall of the main hall of Divastich’s palace. Divastich’s main hall measured 18 m x 12 m and the murals that once covered its walls appear to be records of contemporary events. The siege engine described here is probably a representation of one used during the Arab siege of Samarkand in 712 and, no doubt, used to good effect at Mount Mugh in 722. In this respect these scenes are a portent of Divastich’s own death. Some of the other fragments do indeed depict Arabs, and a coronation scene may show Divastich himself – who was initially courted by the new rulers of the region as rightful ruler of Samarkand.

The examples we have described so far have been concerned with religion, heroism and war but the last we will examine is a detail from a genre scene. The mural representing feasting merchants from Sector XVI, Room 10 at Penjikent shows richly dressed *bon-viveurs*, perhaps representing the ideal of the urbane, sophisticated Penjikent merchant enjoying the fruits of Silk Road commerce. The attention to detail is quite remarkable – a cherubic figure is just visible on the gold or silver cup in one merchant’s hand; a distant reference, perhaps, to the bacchanals of Ancient Greece.

The slender, elegant figures depicted in Penjikent’s murals and wood-sculpture are also to be found on Sogdian silver vessels. The Sogdians were particularly gifted silversmiths and their creations were exported along the Silk Road. The Hermitage Museum houses many examples, including a fine seventh-century gilt-silver plate found at Kulagysh in the Ural foothills which depicts

two Sogdian warriors, probably heroes from a literary epic, participating in a duel. One is armed with a bow and the other a lance, while broken and discarded weapons lie all about them.

When the inhabitants of Penjikent fled the town in 722 they sought refuge at Mount Mugh, about 130 km to the east in the upper reaches of the Zerafshan River. During the 1930s Soviet archeologists excavated the remains of a Sogdian castle at Mugh after a local shepherd discovered documents from the personal archive of Divastich, last of the Sogdian rulers. These and subsequent discoveries included paper, leather and wood documents written in Sogdian, Arabic, Turkish and Chinese and dealing mostly with administrative and legal matters. One fragment contains what appears to be a legal decision regarding an application for a divorce: 'If Catta decides that she will not remain as a wife with Ut-tegin, but will part (?) with him, she shall leave him' (Document No. 3 from Mount Mugh. Quoted in Azarpay, 1981).

Also found at Mugh was a fragmentary description of the heroic Rustam's struggle with the demons, an episode related in the Persian epic, the *Shanama* by Ferdosi. Other episodes from the *Shanama* have been successfully matched with scenes in the wall paintings of Penjikent. The castle at Mugh was comprehensively flattened by the Arabs and, as a result, few substantial artefacts have survived. A rare exception is a fragment from a beautifully painted wooden shield, covered in leather and painted with a depiction of the valiant Rustam, now in the Hermitage Museum. It still shows the marks of the arrows that struck it.

Little is known of the Sogdians after the ninth century. During the late eighth and early ninth centuries many of them left Transoxiana and took up residence at Nishapur in Persia, and Baghdad and Samarra in modern Iraq. The Sogdians were never a unified political power nor, by this period, were they an economic power either. They were gradually absorbed into local populations until they became indistinguishable, both culturally and linguistically, from other communities. The *coup de grâce* was delivered during the thirteenth century by the armies of Genghis Khan, and there the story ended – or so it was believed – until the early part of the last century.

## The Yagnob Valley

In the villages of the Yagnob River valley in the Zerafshan Mountains of Tajikistan, about 80 km north of Dushanbe, around 2,000 local people still speak a dialect descended from Sogdian. The Sogdian language was usurped by Persians from the ninth century onwards and was believed to have been extinct until Soviet researchers made one of the great philological discoveries of the twentieth century. Yagnobi is a spoken language, however written Sogdian exists only in ancient manuscripts like those of Mount Mugh and the letters discovered by Aurel Stein near the Great Wall. Yagnobi is spoken, it seems, by fewer people than any other language in the world and the inhabitants of the villages are slowly moving away from the valley in search of improved economic conditions. The prospects for this, the last remnant of Sogdian civilisation, are bleak.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 30**

Villager of the Yagnob valley, Tajikistan.

There is a caravan road south from Mount Mugh, through the mountains to the modern Tajik capital of Dushanbe. Dushanbe is a new city that did not even emerge as an urban centre until the rail link with Termez was established in the 1920s. There was a settlement at Dushanbe, however, at least as far back as the Bactrian-Greek period of the third century BC. A small ivory head of Alexander found at Dushanbe attests to its role as a stopping-place on the road south to India. This was a subsidiary part of the Silk Road, nonetheless. For a large part of the Silk Road's history, Sogdian Samarkand and China were the focus of much of its trade and this is reflected in the importance of the great east-west caravan trails.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## The Silk Road Between Samarkand and China

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, And I –  
I took the one less travelled by

(From Robert Frost (1874–1963), ‘The Road Not Taken’)

There were two principal routes leading from Samarkand to China, with many side-routes and tracks linking them. The point of divergence was the town of Dzizak, renowned for its wool (see [Map 9](#)). From Dzizak the more southerly route passed through the Tajik town of Khujand and along the Ferghana valley via Margilan, Kuva, Andijan and Osh. Beyond Osh the route veered south across the Pamirs, through Gulcha and Sary Tash before turning east again through Irkeshtam and on to Kashgar. An alternative route from Osh passed through Uzgen and then led south-eastwards through Kögart and Kögart Pass to Kashgar (see [Map 9](#)). The passes through the Pamirs and Tianshan ranges varied according to the seasons but the two key ones on this route seem to have been at Kögart and Irkeshtam. The better-known Torugart Pass – 3,752 m high and about 90 km north-east of Kögart – is now the main crossing point between Kyrgyzstan and China, but this was not always the case. The Tash Rabat caravanserai, located 90 km north of the Torugart Pass in the At Bashi range, is of relatively recent vintage, probably the work of a fifteenth-century Mongol ruler named Muhammad Khan. Tash Rabat is a massive structure, 35 m x 32 m, and the fact that it has been heavily restored in recent years does not detract from its status as one of the most important stone buildings in Central Asia. It sits on a caravan route that heads north to Lake Issyk-kul.



**MAP 9**

The Silk Road between Samarkand and China.

All of the early written sources indicate that the more southerly route, from Dzizak through Ferghana to Osh, is the more ancient of the two. One reason may have been that the terrain between Dzizak and Tashkent was arid steppe, devoid of nourishment for travellers. Only within the past 100 years has irrigation produced a fertile plain and the landscape transformed from that encountered by early wayfarers. The main northerly route from Samarkand gained favour over the shorter and more direct Ferghana valley route during the sixth to seventh centuries, when civil war became a threat to travellers and when the western Turks held sway. With their winter capital to the west of Lake Issyk-kul and their summer capital in Tashkent (formerly Chach), the western Turks became conspicuous consumers of imported goods, and merchants were not slow to accommodate their needs. This was the route followed, in the reverse direction, by the Chinese monk Xuanzang, and his detailed observations have meant that our knowledge of the towns along the way is quite extensive. After Dzizak, the northerly route traversed the steppe to Tashkent, continued onwards to Chimkent and Otrar in southern Kazakhstan and then turned east. The eastward road passed through the Karatau hills, crossed the Talas River at the oasis town of Taraz (Dzhambul) and then passed through desert to the town of Kulan. After Kulan, the road continues east into modern Kyrgyzstan, past the modern capital of Bishkek (a mere staging-post until the nineteenth century) and along the Chu River valley through the fertile plain known as the ‘Land of a Thousand

Springs'. The road went via Tokmak, near the former Kharakhanid capital of Balasagun, and through the Boom Gorge to arrive at the 'Warm Lake', Issyk-kul. There are the remains of settlements on both the northern and southern shores of the lake but the main route to China seems to have passed to the south. On the southern shore of Lake Issyk-kul, at Barskoon, the main northern route turns southward and ascends through the Barskoon Gorge in the Tianshan Mountains to the 4,284 m Bedel Pass. The Bedel Pass is an ancient crossing point into China and is only about 200 km north-west of the important Chinese Silk Road town of Aksu.

## **The Towns Along the Silk Road Between Samarkand and China**

### *The Southern Route*

#### *Khujand*

Khujand (formerly Khodjent), the second largest city of Tajikistan, sits on the Syr Darya (Jaxartes) River at the entrance to the Ferghana valley and was the site of Alexander the Great's easternmost city – Alexandria Eskhate ('Alexandria the Furthest'). For a city of such prodigious antiquity there is disappointingly little remaining. In common with many other Central Asian cities, Khujand was subjected during the Soviet period to a rapid and indiscriminate process of modernisation that erased much of its history. Indeed, the only structure dating back to the Silk Road era is a mud fortress in the centre of the town, close to the riverbank.

The region between Samarkand and Khujand was known as Ushrusana and, until the arrival of the Arabs, was a Sogdian province. During his campaigns of 713–14, Khujand was captured by General Qutaiba ibn Muslim and the damage wrought by both his forces and by the Mongols in the thirteenth century is a further reason why so little remains of the city's history. Khujand was nevertheless an important stopping-place on the route through the Ferghana valley and was renowned for its vineyards and gardens.

The Ferghana valley played an important role in the history of the Silk Road from the very beginning. The waters of the Syr Darya produced a rich, fertile plain more than 250 km in length – still home to about a third of Uzbekistan's population. The first foreign visitor to describe the valley was the Chinese envoy Zhang Qian, who saw it during the second century BC. The abundance of blood-

sweating ‘heavenly’ horses, superior in every respect to Chinese mounts, ensured that Ferghana would remain one of the principal destinations for merchants from the Middle Kingdom until medieval times. There is eyewitness evidence that magnificent horses could still be found in the vicinity of Bukhara as late as 1825. The renowned explorer and veterinarian William Moorcroft (1767–1825) was in Bukhara that year to procure thoroughbred mounts for the British Raj. His efforts were thwarted by the emir, who needed every horse he could find for his campaign against the Kitay-Kipchak rebels, but Moorcroft tells us that only five years earlier the territory along the Oxus was ‘a great mine of horses’ (Alder, 1985). The intervening years, a time of rebellion, had led to the breaking up of what Moorcroft called ‘the finest horse markets in the world’ but there were still a few fine animals to be seen, including a splendid black stallion that he attempted to purchase and dispatch to England. The question of whether such horses were indigenous to the Ferghana valley, or whether it was simply a place of congregation for horse traders, has never been satisfactorily resolved, however.

There were numerous caravanserais and small settlements on the southern route through the valley, and Margilan, just north of the modern town of Ferghana, is one of the most important.

### *Margilan*

In the *Baburnama*, the memoirs of the founder of the Mughal dynasty Babur (1483–1530), Margilan is described as ‘a fine township full of good things. Its apricots and pomegranates are most excellent’. Babur is less charitable about its people: ‘Its people are Sarts, boxers, [who are] noisy and turbulent. Most of the noted bullies of Samarkand and Bukhara are Marghinanis’ (from Babur, 1921).

The town dates back to around the second century BC, the very beginnings of the Silk Road, and was originally known as Marginan. Like Khujand, however, it has little to show for its long history. Only in old photographs can one glimpse the appearance of the town before the Soviet era.

Margilan’s heritage is now more intellectual than architectural: it has been known for the quality of its silks for centuries and is now the centre of silk production for the whole of Uzbekistan. Many local people are involved in the rearing of silk cocoons and the town’s factories employ many others. There are

two types of silk production in Margilan: a pair of vast Soviet-style factories, each with more than 10,000 workers, and a smaller concern known as the Yodgorlik plant that still produces the precious material by hand.

The Ferghana valley was a centre for Buddhism right up until the advent of Islam. At Kuva, 35 km north-east of Ferghana town on the Andijan–Margilan road, are the remains of a town occupying some 12 hectares. Evidence of glass-making, pottery manufacture and metalworking indicates that Kuva was an important commercial centre. A Buddhist temple of the seventh or eighth century was found to contain life-sized clay statues of deities. One of the most striking is a massive bust, complete with a large central *urna* (third eye), now in the State Fine Arts Museum of Uzbekistan. The sculpture is variously described as depicting the Buddha or the Hindu god Shiva.

The Mongols did not spare the town during their campaigns of the thirteenth century and it was subsequently abandoned.

The next key stop on the southern route was the town of Andijan, located on the Andijan-Say River in the eastern Ferghana valley and roughly mid-way between Kashgar and Khujand. Andijan is now an important industrial centre, criss-crossed by irrigation channels and engaged in the production of cotton, silk and different kinds of fruit. The old part of the town was all but obliterated in 1902 by a massive earthquake, but in its day Andijan was a major stopping place on the caravan route to China. Its most famous resident was Babur, descendant of Timur and founder of the Mughal dynasty of India, born in the town in 1483.

The route continues eastwards from Andijan for a further 35 km, crossing into Kyrgyzstan and arriving at Osh, the country's second city. Extravagant claims are made about Osh – that its history dates back 2,500 or even 3,000 years – but it has little to show for it. Osh is now a somewhat grim provincial town without a single monument from its early history. The town attained its apogee in the medieval period, particularly during the ninth to twelfth centuries when it grew fat on Silk Road commerce. For at least 1,000 years Osh has been an important place of pilgrimage for Muslims because of a legend that the Prophet Muhammad once prayed atop Takhti Suleyman (Solomon's throne), a massive 500 m high rock that towers above the town. Babur built a shrine there in 1497 and the structure is now the oldest building in Osh, dating to a time when the Silk Road had already become part of the past. The only real reminder

of Osh's status as a Silk Road town is the bazaar that still straggles for about a kilometre along both banks of the Ak-Buura River. Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek merchants still profit from trade with China but today it is synthetic clothing, plastic toys and kitchenware that clutter the stalls. Felt hats and knives are the only local products that attest to the rich heritage of Ferghana's craftsmen.

The disappointing dearth of history in the modern town of Osh is more than made up for by two heavily defaced rock-carvings, high on a rock in the small town of Aravan, 25 km to the west. The engravings depict 'heavenly horses' and probably date to the late first millennium BC. The heavenly horses of Ferghana disappeared long ago but in the valley there are still a few reminders of the 'blood-sweating dragon-steeds', so coveted by China's Emperor Wudi.<sup>1</sup> Soviet archeologists discovered more than 100,000 petroglyphs at Saimaly-Tash in the Ferghana range near K  k-Art, and others at Aravan and Airymach-Tau near Osh. Among them are a number of depictions of horses whose resemblance to those found in early Chinese art is quite remarkable. Who left these images and why they did so will probably never be known but one can speculate that some wandering Chinese horse trader of the Han dynasty may have placed them there.

The last large town before the mountain-passes to China is Uzgen, north-east of Osh on the banks of the Kara Darya River, a tributary of the Jaxartes (Syr Darya). Like Osh, the town has an ancient history and some of its buildings still survive. Uzgen flourished during the eleventh and twelfth centuries as a capital of the Kharakhanids and once occupied a much larger site between the Kara Darya and Jassy rivers. The narrowness of the Kara Darya valley at Uzgen perhaps meant that tolls were levied on passing caravans – a source of revenue for the town that contributed to its rapid growth. The Mongols emasculated Uzgen but a few precious monuments have survived – a minaret and three joined mausolea, reminders of Uzgen's heyday and rare examples of pre-Timurid architecture. The minaret has been rebuilt in recent years by a joint German–Kyrgyz project and now stands about 27 m in height. The Kharakhanids probably erected it during the eleventh century, and its design and decorative brickwork of rhombuses and rosettes provided a model for the great minarets of Vabkent and Bukhara, built during the twelfth century by the same regime. The original structure stood much higher, perhaps over 40 m, and a rare old photograph makes for an interesting comparison with its appearance today

(Figure 31).

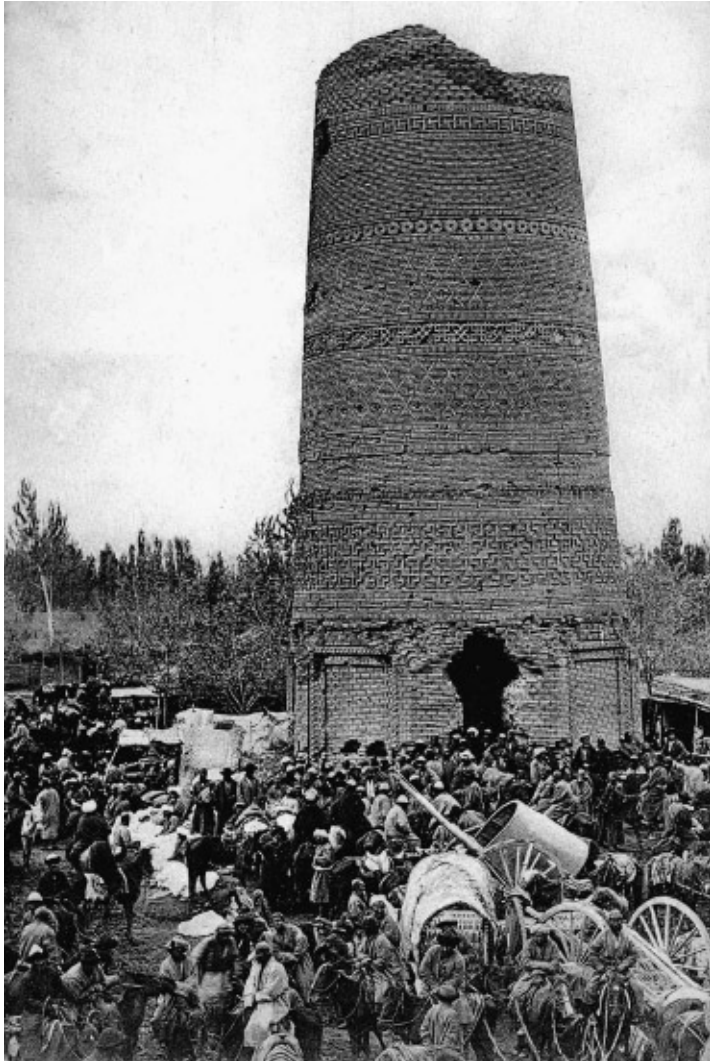
The three mausolea are situated to the south of the minaret, a group of three joined structures each with a single chamber and a domed roof. The oldest of the three is in the centre and was built for the first Kharakhanid ruler Nasr ibn Ali (Arslan Ilek) who died around 1013. On its heavily restored façade, traces of *girikh* (geometrical arabesque) decoration are still discernible. The northernmost (left hand) mausoleum was built in 1152 for Jalal AD-Din Husayn and is decorated with flowing Naskhi calligraphy on the arch, and inside with incised terracotta ornamentation. The third, southernmost mausoleum was completed in about 1186 and is the most ornate of the three – richly decorated throughout its external and internal surfaces with geometric, floral and calligraphic motifs that occur subsequently at the Shah-I Zinda necropolis in Samarkand.

There were many other routes criss-crossing the Ferghana valley, including a more northerly trail from Khujand along the Syra Darya River through the towns of Pap, Akhsiket and Namangan. Of the three, Akhsiket is the most important and was the capital of the Ferghana valley under the Samanids. Under the Kharakhanids the focus of power shifted to Uzgen but the town continued to draw revenue from trade. Its metalworkers were noted for the excellence of their steel, and weapons and armour were exported to many of the countries of the Silk Road. Akhsiket steel was as nothing against the Mongol holocaust, however, and the town was destroyed and abandoned.

### *The Northern Route*

Travellers who braved the crossing of the sterile region to the north-east of Dzizak would eventually come to the Tashkent oasis – the old principality of Chach. The oasis is watered by the Chirchik River and was inhabited as early as the sixth century BC, sitting as it does at a crossroads of old trade routes. During the early period of the Arab campaigns the capital of Chach was located in what is now the centre of modern Tashkent. Known simply as Chach Madina (‘capital of Chach’), the town comprised a rectangular citadel, a palace and a Zoroastrian fire-temple. Merchants and nobles occupied large houses and sometimes castles, prospering from trade with both Turkish nomads and with China. During the eighth century Chach was attacked by both Chinese and Arab armies. The Chinese arrived in 749, capturing and executing the ruler, according to Arab

accounts ‘for the non-fulfilment of his duties as vassal’. The man’s son appealed to the Arabs for help and the result was the Battle of Talas River, fought in July 751, at which the Chinese were defeated and divested of all influence in Central Asia for the remainder of the Silk Road’s history.



**Figure 31**

The minaret at Uzgen, Kyrgyzstan, before restoration. Old pre-restoration photograph, taken around 1905.

Sometime during the Chinese or Arab campaigns in Chach, Chach Madina was destroyed by fire and the capital was moved to a new site about 5 km to the north-west. The new town was named Binkath and quickly became the largest city in Transoxiana. Arab geographers have left a detailed description of the appearance of the town: The town of Binkath was surrounded by two lines of walls, of which the outer line had seven gates and the interior line ten gates. The

*shahristan* [inner town around the citadel] had three gates, the citadel two [...] The palace and prison were in the citadel, the cathedral mosque outside but close to it, the bazaars partly in the *shahristan*, but chiefly in the *rabad* [suburbs]. The length and breadth of the town from side to side of the outer walls was approximately one *farsakh*.<sup>2</sup> In the town and its neighbourhood there were many gardens and vineyards.

(Quoted in Barthold, 1981)

Under Samanid rule during the ninth and tenth centuries Binkath was a thriving commercial centre. The Arab geographer Mukadasi outlined the town's trade goods during the tenth century. They included: 'high saddles of horse hide, quivers, tents, hides (imported from the Turks and tanned), cloaks, praying carpets, leather capes, linseed, fine bows, needles of poor quality, cotton for export to the Turks, and scissors' (quoted in Barthold, 1981). He also mentions that the town produced porcelain of matchless quality.

From the eleventh century onwards the town became known as Tashkent ('city of stone') and was controlled by the Kharakhanids, then by the Kharakhitai, and finally by the Khorezmshahs. At the beginning of the thirteenth century the Khorezmshahs were under threat from the Turko-Mongol Naiman tribe and a decision was taken to evacuate Tashkent and then destroy the town. Whether or not the town was actually destroyed is unclear, but the fact that the chroniclers of the Mongol campaigns of only a few years later do not mention it would indicate that it probably was.

The town enjoyed a brief revival of its fortunes under Timur and his descendants when a series of mausolea were built. The three fifteenth-century mausolea north of the Navoi Literary Museum are the oldest surviving buildings in Tashkent. They were built for Yunus Khan (grandfather of the Mughal emperor, Babur), for the Kazakh prince Kaldirgach Bey and for Sheikh Khavendi Takhur (known as Sheikhantaur).

Soon after the Ming rulers of China restored sovereignty to their country in 1368, the doors to land-based international trade slammed shut and, as with many other places in Central Asia, Tashkent's importance as a caravan city declined. During the sixteenth century it fell to the Uzbek Shaybanid Khanate and settled into a role of provincial trading centre. So it remained until 1865

when it fell to the Russians and became a key participant in the ‘Great Game’ as a base for that country’s conquest of Central Asia. On 26 April 1966 an earthquake devastated Tashkent and much of its remaining architectural heritage was lost. The city’s past survives only in a few, heavily restored Timurid buildings like the Sheikhtaur complex described above, and in early photographs (Figure 32).

The town of Isfijab in southern Kazakhstan is two or three day’s journey through the mountains that lie to the north of Tashkent. Isfijab, known as ‘the town on the White River’, was also called Sayram, and the modern town – 10 km east of Chimkent – still carries this name. With a population of about 40,000, Isfijab was one of the largest towns on this section of the Silk Road and was home to merchants from Samarkand, Bukhara, Nakhshab (Karshi) and Balkh, as well as to local traders. The merchants of Isfijab roamed far and wide, trading cotton, glassware, ceramics, weapons, copper, iron and slaves. It was well known as a centre for the slave trade – captives from the region’s endless cycle of war. According to the tenth-century geographer Mukadasi, the town contained no fewer than 1,700 caravanserais for merchants.

The Mongols brought Isfijab’s prosperity to an end and, when trade revived under the Timurids, it was the adjacent town of Chimkent that came to dominate this part of southern Kazakhstan.

Close to the point where the Arys River flows into the Syr Darya (Jaxartes), about 130 km north-west of Chimkent, is the town of Otrar. Otrar is now a dead city, ruined and abandoned, but it was not always so. It once sat at the intersection of a number of caravan routes: west across the Kyzyl Kum to Khorezm, south along the Syr Darya to Chach, and east along the Arys River to Taraz and Balasagun. The Soviet archeologist A. N. Bernshtam remarked that ‘it is really hard to find a more advantageous and more perilous site in the whole of Central Asia than that of Otrar’. The central ruins are situated in an area of about 20 hectares on top of a pentagonal hill, and the site was occupied as far back as the first century AD. The town used to be known as Kangu-Turban or Turarband and, during the eighth and ninth centuries, it was the capital of the Kangar Turks. The local rulers minted their own coins, suggesting that the oasis enjoyed a high degree of autonomy.



**Figure 32**

The Ankhor Chaikana (teahouse), Ankhor Chaikana, Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Photographed around 1909.

By the tenth century the town had adopted its modern name of Otrar and had expanded to occupy an area of 200 hectares. As Islam took root in southern Kazakhstan, the urban centres enjoyed a period of unparalleled prosperity. With commercial activity came a rise in cultural activity and the emergence of men of letters. One of them was the brilliant scientist Abu Nasr al-Farabi (870–950), born at Vasij in the Otrar oasis.

At the beginning of the thirteenth century Otrar submitted to the Khorezmshahs, but the decision to do so proved to be a fateful one. On one particular day in 1218, Otrar's governor made one of those decisions on which the fate of worlds revolves – the decision of Gavrilo Princip to assassinate Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, and the decision of Hitler to invade Poland in 1939 were no more disastrous for humankind – and the consequences of his actions still reverberate down through the centuries. The governor of Otrar, a man named Inal-khan (or Inalchik), was a relative of Shah Muhammad of Khorezm, though whether or not he was acting under the latter's orders remains unclear. A caravan of 450 merchants and about 500 camels arrived in Otrar in 1218, dispatched by the Mongols to initiate trade with the Khorezmshahs. The men of the caravan were all Muslims – with the possible exception of a single Hindu – and the merchandise carried included gold and silver, Chinese silk and furs. Inal-khan ordered that the men be detained as spies, probably because of a

desire to acquire their goods although one version has it that the Hindu member of the caravan spoke to him with undue familiarity. Whatever the reason, and whether or not Shah Muhammad was party to the governor's action, the caravaneers were massacred to a man and their goods sold off to the merchants of Samarkand and Bukhara. A solitary survivor – a camel driver – managed to escape and carried the news to Genghis Khan. Genghis at first exercised restraint, sending an envoy named Ibn Kafraj Bughra and two Mongol escorts to Shah Muhammad's capital at Kunya Urgench. They carried Genghis' protest with them and demanded that Governor Inal-khan be submitted to justice. Muhammad's response was to order the death of the envoy and to shave off the beards of the two Mongols. From that moment conflict between the Mongols and the Khorezmshahs became inevitable and the events at Otrar and Kunya Urgench ignited an inferno that burned as far as the gates of Vienna and consumed the lives of millions of people – most of them innocents.

Otrar fell to the Mongols after a five-month siege in February 1220. At the end, Inal-khan barricaded himself inside the citadel with 20,000 of his troops. When they ran out of arrows they were forced to bombard the Mongols with roof tiles but it was all to no end. Inal-khan was captured and, according to the contemporary historian Nasawi, was killed by molten silver being poured into his eyes and ears.

Many of the towns obliterated by the Mongols were not rebuilt for decades or centuries, and some were never rebuilt. Otrar, however, rose quickly from its ashes, and by the middle of the thirteenth century was once again a major commercial centre. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries Otrar became known for the minting of coins and a number of large civic buildings were erected – including a *madrassah* and a mosque.

By the second half of the fourteenth century the town was part of Timur's empire and it was here, in February 1405, that the great man died in the midst of preparing an invasion of China. During Timur's reign a mausoleum was erected above the grave of the twelfth-century Sufi and poet Akhmed Yasavi in the town of Turkistan, 40 km north of Otrar. Akhmed Yasavi's teacher and mentor Arslan-Baba was interred in Otrar, and Timur erected a mausoleum above his grave as well. Two fretwork columns are all that remains of the original structure.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were a period of decline for Otrar; a time of struggle between Uzbeks and Kazakhs. The Kazakhs were firmly in control of the town by 1510 but were then afflicted with raids from Dzungarian nomads. Many of the southern Kazakh towns – Sayram and Turkistan among them – were destroyed, and what remained of Silk Road trade collapsed. By the mid-seventeenth century the town had been abandoned for good.

To give an idea of the exigencies endured by travellers along the northerly route, the Florentine mercantile agent Francesco Balducci Pegolotti (*fl.* 1315–40) reported that the journey from Otrar to Yining in China's Ili valley took 45 days using pack-mules. From Yining another 70 days were required to reach the garrison town of Jiuquan in Gansu. The road from Otrar led south-east along the Arys River and then east as far as the Talas River. The main crossing point of the Talas is at Taraz (Dzhambul), once one of the largest towns in the region, and nearby is the site of the Battle of the Talas River – fought between Arabs and Chinese in 751. Mukadasi described Taraz during the tenth century, mentioning that it was famous for its goatskins. He also tells us that it was a large fortified city with a moat and four gates, and that the main mosque was situated between its markets.

The road east from Taraz follows the route of the modern M39 highway and crosses desert to the town of Kulan, near to the modern city of Lugovoy. According to Mukadasi's description, Kulan had already been abandoned by the tenth century and the castle and vineyards that graced the town during the seventh and eighth centuries were already long gone. Beyond Kulan, the road continued in an easterly direction into today's Kyrgyzstan. Bishkek (Frunze), the Kyrgyz capital, was no more than a stop on a caravan trail during the Silk Road era.

The town of Balasagun, 60 km to the east of Bishkek and about 10 km south of the modern town of Tokmak, was far more important. Balasagun was once a regional capital of the Kharakhanid Empire and from the tenth to twelfth century was pre-eminent among some 80 caravan towns along the Chu River valley. The large number of Chinese coins found at the site attest to the commercial importance of the town. In 1128 the Kharakhanid rulers of Balasagun found themselves under threat from another Turkish tribe, the Karluks of the lower Ili valley – whom they themselves had displaced during the tenth century. They

sought help from the Kharakhitai, the ‘Black Khitans’ who had ruled China as the Liao dynasty. The Kharakhitai obliged by seizing control of Balasagun and establishing their capital there, although their treasury appears to have been at Uzgen. When the Mongol armies arrived the city surrendered without a fight and was spared, but from the thirteenth until the fifteenth century the town entered a period of slow decline and was eventually abandoned altogether.



**Figure 33**

The Burana minaret, Chuy Valley, northern Kyrgyzstan.

*The minaret dates back to the Kharakhanid period of the eleventh century, and stands at a height of 24.6 m. It once stood about 45 m but lost its top section during an earthquake. The stone circles in the foreground of this photograph are millstones, gathered from other parts of the country and brought to the site for safekeeping. Also deposited at the site and visible to the left are Balbal grave-markers, once erected by nomadic Turks above the graves of their companions to designate how many of the enemy the occupant had slain.<sup>3</sup>*

The heavily restored Burana minaret, the remnants of two mausolea and a mound of earth, 100 m x 100 m, are all that remains of the once prosperous Silk Road town of Balasagun (Figure 33).

About 8 km south-west of Tokmak, just to the north-west of Balasagun, are the remains of the important settlement of Ak-Beshim. Ak-Beshim is believed to be the site of the town known in Xuanzang’s day by the Chinese name of Suye or Suyab. Suye was the winter capital of the western Turks. During excavations from 1953–4 and 1955–8, Soviet archeologists uncovered two Buddhist temples

and the vestiges of a Nestorian Christian church. In the first of the two temples the remains of four large Buddhas were discovered, seated on high thrones; and in the second a large image within a niche was found. More artefacts were reported to have been discovered during 1998 excavations.



**MAP 10**

Trade routes and principal sites of Iran.

The road from Balasagun follows the Chu River eastwards for a further 140 km and then enters the Boom Gorge before reaching the shores of the ‘Warm Lake’: Lake Issyk-kul. Measuring 170 km long and 70 km wide, Issyk-kul is the world’s second largest alpine lake and the volcanic activity beneath its surface means that it never freezes despite being 1,600 m above sea level. At least part of the old road is now submerged beneath the lake, courtesy of the same volcanic activity, but it appears that the main highway to China originated at Barskoon on the southern shore. From Barskoon the road ascends through the Barskoon Pass and across the central Tianshan. Xuanzang came this way in 630 and almost died in the process. The whole area abounds with peaks of over 5,000 m: the 7,439 m Pik Pobeda (‘Victory Peak’) and the 6,995 m Khan-Tengri (the ‘Prince of Spirits’) are the two highest.

Once over the Tianshan and through the Bedel Pass, travellers found themselves on the home stretch to China, the Celestial Kingdom.

\*

## The Silk Road Through Persia

And strange at Ecbatan the trees

And strange at Lebanon the trees

Take leaf by leaf the evening strange

The flooding dark about their knees

The mountains over Persia change  
And now at Kermanshah the gate  
Dark empty and the withered grass  
And through the twilight now the late  
Few travelers in the westward pass  
And Baghdad darken and the bridge

Across the silent river gone

And through Arabia the edge  
Of evening widen and steal on  
And deepen on Palmyra's street  
The wheel rut in the ruined stone  
And Lebanon fade out and Crete  
High through the clouds and overblown.

(‘YOU, ANDREW MARVELL’ by Archibald MacLeish, 1892–1982)

We have already examined the two great westward branches of the Silk Road that originated at Merv. The first led through the Parthian capital of Nisa and then crossed the Kopet Dagh Mountains into modern Iran, while the second headed south-west through Sarakhs (Saraghs). The two routes converged at Masshad in Iran, capital of Khurasan<sup>4</sup> province and a Silk Road city of incalculable religious and commercial significance. The passage of the Silk Road through Iran and beyond followed a clearly identified and well-documented route. The modern highway that runs across the north of the country follows the ancient way, originating in Masshad, passing through Nishapur and then skirting the northern edge of the 200,000 km<sup>2</sup> Dasht-e Kevir (the Great Salt Desert) along the southern foothills of the Alborz Mountains. At Tehran (ancient Ray) the route divides. The northerly route passes through Gazvin and Tabriz before entering Turkey and continuing onwards to Istanbul (Byzantium). The more southerly route leads to Hamadan and Kermanshah and then on through Baghdad and Palmyra to the Mediterranean ports and beyond.

There were subsidiary routes that originated in Ray and led south through Kashan, Isfahan, Yazd, Kerman, Bam and onwards to India. There was also a route to India from Masshad, down through the eastern part of the country, and a route east from Masshad through Herat to Balkh. The southern routes were vital arterial thoroughfares for early trade but lack of space places them beyond the scope of this book and we must limit ourselves to the main east–west highway.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

# Parthians and Sasanians

Before examining the Silk Road cities that lie along the route through Iran, we will look briefly at the two great eras of Persian history that dominated much of its trade.

## **Parthians**

By 331 BC, Alexander the Great had completed his conquest of Persia. The Achaemenian Empire was brought to an end after defeats at Granica in 334 BC, Issus in 333 BC and Gaugamela in 331 BC. Susa was looted and Persepolis put to the torch, and the last Achaemenian king, Darius III Codomannus, fled to Bactria where he was assassinated by his cousin Bessus. Alexander continued eastwards and conquered Afghanistan and northern India before dying in Babylon in 323 BC at the age of only 32. After Alexander's death his empire was divided and the eastern part – Iran, Mesopotamia and northern Syria – fell to one of his generals, Seleucus I Nicator (r.312–281 BC). Seleucus founded the Hellenistic Seleucid dynasty and established or expanded cities at Damghan (Hecatompylos), Ray and Susa – populating them with Greek migrants who intermarried with, and absorbed the traditions of, the local Iranian population. By the time of his death the Seleucid Empire controlled Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and Turkey. The western part of the empire was controlled from Antioch in ancient Syria (modern south-east Turkey), and the eastern dominions from Seleucia (near Ctesiphon) on the Tigris, but the dynasty was short-lived. By 238 BC the Parthians – a nomadic Iranian tribe from Central Asia – had seized control of the area between the Caspian and Aral seas. Their founder, Arsaces I (c.250–c.211 BC), and his successors, gradually seized the Seleucids' lands, establishing capitals at Nisa, Damghan (Hecatompylos), Ray and Ecbatan. During the reigns of Mithradates I (r.171–138 BC), and Artabanus I (r.127–124 BC), the Iranian plateau and the Tigris-Euphrates valley fell under Parthian control with a new capital established at Ctesiphon, just south of Baghdad. By 113 BC, Mithradates II (r.123–88 BC) had defeated the Scythian tribes threatening the north, and in 92 BC the first contacts with the Roman Empire to the west were made. No treaties were concluded and the seeds for future conflict between the two powers were sown. Under Mithradates II, the Parthians occupied northern Mesopotamia and the great caravan city of Dura Europos in modern Syria, near the border with Iraq. Because of their position on the trade routes between Asia and Rome the Parthians amassed great wealth, both by commerce and from the customs duties levied on goods travelling through their territories. Many merchants attempted to circumvent Parthian-controlled territories to avoid

these taxes and a secondary route developed through the Caucasus. In 115 BC or 105 BC, the Chinese emperor, Wudi, and the Parthian king, Mithradates II, exchanged ambassadors – the Chinese sent gifts of silk and the Parthians sent acrobats and ostrich eggs to the imperial court – and both countries appear to have enjoyed cordial relations.<sup>1</sup>

By 64 BC the last vestige of the Seleucids had been defeated by Roman proconsul Pompey (106–48 BC). Syria was absorbed into the Roman Empire and an uneasy standoff with the Parthians ensued – with their common frontier close to Dura Europos. The truce came to an abrupt end in 53 BC when Marcus Licinius Crassus, governor of the Roman province of Syria, led an army of infantry against the Parthians near Carrhae. The battle was a disaster for the Romans. They were outmanoeuvred by Parthian cavalry who fired backwards as they galloped away from the enemy in a manoeuvre known as the ‘Parthian Shot’. The sight of huge silk banners, unfurled by the Parthians, also terrified the Romans. This is thought to have been the Romans’ first contact with the precious material that, within seven years, had reached the markets of Rome.

Over the next 200 years the Romans launched a succession of invasions but none of them achieved more than limited success. Between AD 113 and AD 117 the Roman emperor, Trajan (r. AD 98–117), made considerable inroads into the Parthians’ domains, capturing Ctesiphon and reaching the shores of the Persian Gulf – before dying of disease. His successor, Hadrian, was elected to make peace rather than capitalise on the gains the Romans had made, but the dynasty had become weakened by internal feuds and external pressures. The Romans to the west, the Kushans in the east and nomadic tribes to the north all served to undermine Parthian rule. In AD 164–5 Roman general Gaius Avidius Cassius captured the cities of Ctesiphon and Seleucia, but his army was assailed by an epidemic of what appears to have been smallpox. They retreated from the Parthians’ territories, spreading the disease as they went, but despite these setbacks Silk Road commerce still managed to continue. Throughout the second century AD, cities like Palmyra and Hatra flourished. The former was under Roman control, but was culturally Parthian, and both cities contained influences from both worlds. Roman emperor Septimius Severus (r.145–211) attacked Parthia again in 197–8. Ctesiphon was sacked, but because of a lack of provisions for the troops the Romans were forced to retreat. Septimius Severus

laid siege to Hatra in 199 but failed to take it. Conflict quickly ensued between two claimants to the Parthian throne, Vologeses IV or V and Artabanus IV. They were finally overthrown in about 224 by Ardashir I (r.224–41), the founder of the Sasanian Empire. Ardashir was the son of Babak, a descendant of Sasan (from whom the dynasty takes its name) and a vassal king of Persis – modern Fars in south-western Iran.

The Parthians utilised the proceeds of commerce to build cities and pursue the arts. The artistic excellence of the Parthians was evident in the last section in the finds at their early capital of Nisa in modern Turkmenistan. A Parthian innovation, first appearing on coins struck in the first century BC was ‘frontality’ – the use of the frontal pose in place of the profile. They were also consummate sculptors and the massive bronze portrait of a Parthian prince or military commander from Shami, in the mountains around Malamir in south-western Iran, is probably the greatest of their statuary. This 1.9 m high figure, in Tehran’s National Museum, dates back to the second to first century BC and – like much of their early sculpture – is characterised by influences from the Greek world.

Parthian merchants travelled to China from an early period. Jacques Gernet (1995) relates the story of the Parthian trader who conducted his business in the early sixth century, along the Yangtze between Sichuan and the East China Sea.

Within a short period he had accumulated enough material wealth to fill two junks but was still greedy for more. When he reached Mount Niu-t’ou in the Xincheng commandery he encountered a Buddhist monk and was converted to the faith. He decided to divest himself of his material possessions and proceeded to sink one of his junks. Just as the second junk was about to be sunk a group of monks arrived and implored him to use what remained of his wealth to carry out pious works.

(From *Hsü kao-seng chuan* by the monk Ta-hsüan (596–667). Quoted in Gernet, 1995)

## Sasanians

From the foundation of the dynasty in 224, until its destruction by the Arabs in 637–51, the Sasanians ranged far and wide in search of territory and profit. As they fought for control of Silk Road traffic the Sasanians exerted pressure on the Roman (Byzantine) Empire to the west and the Kushans (and their successors the Hephthalites), in the east. By the time of Shapur I (r.241–71) the empire extended from Sogdiana and Iberia (Georgia) in the north to the Mazun region of Arabia in the south; and from the upper Tigris and Euphrates valleys in the west as far as the Indus River in the east. Shapur I launched campaigns against the Roman Empire – invading Syria, Anatolia and Armenia and laying siege to Antioch. In 260 he defeated the Roman emperor, Valerian, at Edessa (modern Urfa in Turkey) and took him prisoner – an event celebrated in one of the great Sasanian rock reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam, just to the north of Persepolis. The centres of the empire were Ctesiphon on the Tigris and Bishapur and Firuzabad in Fars province. Bishapur was built with the help of Roman slaves captured with Valerian, who may have installed its mosaic floors.

Under the Sasanians a new wave of Persian nationalism enveloped the country and new styles in art and architecture developed. The state religion was Zoroastrianism, although Jews, Christians, Manichaeans and Buddhists were tolerated to varying degrees by different kings. The Sasanians' language was Pahlavi and they excelled in the arts: their architecture, sculpture, textiles and metalwork were renowned throughout the world. The squinch – an arch that spans each corner of a square building – was a Sasanian innovation that allowed the addition of a dome. Sasanian metalwork was exported the length of the Silk Road and influenced the work of Sogdian and Chinese craftsmen. Their techniques originated with the Achaemenians, but the Sasanians perfected them. Their skills in casting, chasing and embossing were second to none and Persian silver became one of the most prized commodities of the Silk Road ([Figure 34](#)).



**Figure 34**

A gilded-silver ewer. Sasanian style, fifth–sixth century, 37.5 cm in height, perhaps from ancient Bactria (Afghanistan).<sup>2</sup>

*Unearthed in 1983 from the tomb of General Li Xian (d.569) and his wife Wu Hui (d.547) at Guyuan, Ningxia province, China, and currently housed in the Guyuan Museum, Ningxia province, China. This ewer is decorated with three couples and appears to represent soldiers taking leave of their loved ones as they depart for war (probably episodes from the Trojan War). On the handle is a helmeted figure of a Westerner, and the style is unmistakably Persian. General Li was governor of the town of Guyuan (ancient Yuanzhou) and assigned to protect the Silk Road. He probably obtained the flask from a passing merchant.*

Sasanian silversmiths attained their highest standard during the long reign of Shapur II (r.309–79), possibly because craftsmen were brought to Persia from other parts of the empire. The most common vessel was the shallow plate, typically decorated with scenes of royal heroism, hunting or mythology. They were produced long after the death of the ruler they depicted and are therefore difficult to date. There are examples in most museums around the world – the Hermitage has one of the largest collections – and many have been preserved in

Iranian institutions.

The Sasanians also perfected the technique of glass production. Like the silversmiths, they built upon the skills of their predecessors and produced bowls and vases of exceptional quality, often blown into a mould to produce dimpling or geometric patterns. Examples have been found all along the Silk Road – the Famensi Pagoda near Xian and the Shoso-in repository in Nara, to name but two.

Sasanian Iran was a major producer of silk and was also a broker for Chinese silk that it sold on to the West. Silk weaving appears to have developed in Iran among the captives brought back to the country by Shapur I (r.241–71) during his campaigns against the Roman Empire. After Shapur's capture of the Roman emperor, Valerian, in 260, more than 70,000 captives were taken to Persia. The expertise they brought with them led to the development of silk manufacturing, centred in Shapur's capital at Bishapur. The Sasanians soon achieved renown in both the East and West for their polychrome fabrics, some woven with golden thread or trimmed with precious stones. It appears that they imported silk yarn from China, perhaps buying it through intermediaries in India, and dominated trade in the precious fabric until Byzantium managed to develop its own sericulture around the sixth century.

The fifth century was a time of tribulation and decline for the Sasanian kings. Nomadic groups, especially the Hephthalites, attacked them from the north and east and their dominions were beset by famine and drought. In 484 the Hephthalites captured and killed the Sasanian king Peroz (r.459–84) and for 20 years Persia became a tributary state. The dynasty revived under Khusrau I (r.532–79) and Khusrau II 'The Victorious' (r.591–628). They formed alliances with a new power in the East – the Turks – and the Hephthalites were defeated. Khusrau II also launched military campaigns against the West, capturing Antioch in 611, Jerusalem in 614 and Alexandria in 619. They built grand palaces in their capital, Ctesiphon, and at Bishapur and Firuzabad, consisting of massive rectangular buildings with an entrance arch and *iwans* (covered or vaulted halls) that became the model for the mosques of the Islamic era. The great reception *iwan* and half of the façade of Khusrau I's palace at Ctesiphon, south of Baghdad, still survives.

It was not to last, however. In 623 the Byzantine emperor, Heraclius, attacked from Armenia, seized Ganzak (in the north-west Iranian province of Azerbaijan)

and destroyed its fire-altar. The Sasanians retaliated, forming an alliance with the Avars and besieging Constantinople but the city held and Khusrau II's reign ended with his execution in 628. The last scion of the Sasanians was Yazdegerd III (r.632–51), Khusrau's grandson. The new force in the region, the Arabs, took advantage of the weakened state of both Byzantium and Persia, and attacked. The decisive battle occurred in 636 at al-Qadisiyya, on one of the Euphrates canals not far from al-Hirah. The Sasanian general, Rustam, was killed during the battle and Ctesiphon, the capital, was seized. Yazdegerd III fled east and although his armies rallied they were decisively beaten at Nehavand, south of Hamadan, in 642. Yazdegerd spent his remaining years as a fugitive in the eastern territories of Khurasan until 651, when he was assassinated at Merv. With the death of Yazdegerd the Sasanian dynasty came to an end, although several of the king's relatives sought refuge in China at the Tang court.<sup>3</sup>

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Main East–West Silk Road Across  
Iran

## **Masshad**

Masshad, located 875 km north-east of Tehran, is Iran's holiest city and a major caravan stop on the Silk Road. The town used to be called Sanabad and did not become a place of mass pilgrimage until the sixteenth century. Imam Reza, eighth imam of the Shi'ite tradition, and heir to the Abbasid Caliphate, passed through Sanabad in 817 en route between Baghdad and Merv. He died after eating grapes, possibly poisoned on the orders of Caliph Ma'mun. Ma'mun instructed that Imam Reza be interred in Sanabad, beside the tomb of his own father, the celebrated caliph, Harun Al Rashid (r.786–809) and thereafter the town became a place of pilgrimage for the Shi'ite faithful. The town became known as Masshad ('the place of martyrdom') but it did not attain international status as a pilgrimage site until many centuries later. Masshad's geographical location placed it firmly in the path of every invading army wanting to march the old trade routes, and the city endured an all-too-familiar cycle of destruction and reconstruction. The original shrine was destroyed in the tenth century by Sebuktigin (r.977–97), founder of the Ghaznavid Empire, and was then rebuilt in 1009 by his son, the formidable Mahmud of Ghazni (r.998–1032). When the Mongols attacked and destroyed the nearby town of Tus in 1220, Masshad received much of its populace and began a period of expansion that culminated in the fifteenth century when it became capital of Khurasan. Sharukh (r.1405–47), the son of Timur, expanded Imam Reza's mausoleum and his wife, the devout and gifted Gohar Shad, built a mosque on the site that still bears her name. These structures, built during the period of 1405–18, still stand, although successive Iranian rulers down to the present have embellished them ([Figure 35](#)).



**Figure 35**

The Holy Shrine of Imam Reza, Mashhad, Iran. The shrine dates to the fifteenth century and later.

Despite its precarious strategic position and frequent raids from Central Asia by Turkish nomads, Mashhad continued to prosper both as a religious and commercial centre. Both pilgrims and merchants followed the same east–west highway, and both activities – worship and commerce – became inseparable. The town is still noted for its spices, dyes, carpets and silks; and religious patronage by Shah Abbas I in the seventeenth century, and by successive rulers thereafter, ensured that the city’s fortunes did not decline with those of the Silk Road. Millions of pilgrims still visit Mashhad today and Sir Roger Stevens describes the city as containing, ‘probably the greatest concentration of religious buildings in the world’ (Stevens, 1962).

Before the Mongols obliterated the town of Tus, 22 km north-west of Mashhad, it was the provincial capital and an important commercial centre. Little remains of pre-Mongol Tus, except for part of the clay ramparts, and the town is now best known as the birthplace of the poet Ferdosi (c.935–1020). Ferdosi is most famous for his epic work the *Shanama* (‘The Epic of Kings’), written over a period of 30 years – but he is also remembered for his meticulous recording of Persian culture and history and for helping to preserve the Persian language, Farsi, at a time when the remaining (mainly rural) parts of Iran were converting to Islam and there was a genuine concern that the old traditions, language and culture would be subsumed by those of the Arabs’. Some of the heroes of Ferdosi’s *Shanama* appear in works of art along the Silk Road – most notably

the episodes from the Rustam cycle discernible in the wall paintings of Penjikent, Tajikistan. Ferdosi was inadequately recompensed for his masterpiece by Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni (r.998–1032) and responded with a withering satire on the king's character and forebears.

Tus sits just east of a road that ran, and still runs, to the north of the main east–west Silk Road. The Masshad–Gorgan road runs parallel with the better-known route and continues right along the Caspian coast to Astara, on the Iran–Azerbaijan border. This route was never a match for the main east–west route but it did pass through a number of important commercial and cultural centres, and these are examined later in this book.

## Nishapur

The main highway from Masshad to Tehran crosses a stretch of barren red waste for 115 km before reaching the town of Nishapur (Neyshabur). Nishapur is now a small, somewhat somnolent place with few old buildings, but it was once Khurasan's capital and a flourishing artistic and commercial centre. The town was founded during the rule of the Sasanian king, Shapur I (r.241–71), but attained its heyday during the ninth and tenth centuries. Along with Samarkand and Ray it was an important producer of fine ceramics, as well as locally mined turquoise and glass. Excavations at Nishapur reveal that exceptionally fine glassware was produced under the Samanids (875–999) and the Seljuks (1037–1194).

Nishapur's most celebrated luminary was the poet, Hakim Omar Khayyam (c.1048–c.1131). His poetry gained widespread popularity in the West during the Victorian era when it was translated, and sometimes embellished, by Edward Fitzgerald. He is best known for his rhyming quatrains (*rubaiyat*), much altered and adapted by Fitzgerald but inexpressibly beautiful, nonetheless:

We are no other than a moving row  
Of Magic Shadow-shapes that come and go  
Round with the Sun-illumined Lantern held

In Midnight by the Master of the Show;  
But helpless Pieces of the Game He plays  
Upon his Checkerboard of Nights and Days;  
Hither and thither moves, and checks, and slays,  
And one by one back in the Closet lays.

(Edward Fitzgerald (1809–83), 'The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam of Nishapur')

In Iran, Omar Khayyam is better known as a mathematician and astronomer; his poems are too fatalistic and include too much imbibing of alcohol for some. He is buried in the grounds of the sixteenth-century shrine of Imamzadeh Mohammad Mahrugh.

Nishapur's glory days were brief. During the mid-twelfth century it was attacked by Turkish nomads and damaged by an earthquake, and in the thirteenth century it suffered two Mongol attacks and a further earthquake. The city was rebuilt each time but was eventually superseded by Masshad.

The road west from Nishapur is no less desolate than the previous stretch.

After a further 115 km, in an open field just west of the small town of Sabzevar, stands one of Iran's finest and best-preserved Seljuk-era minarets. Bereft of its balcony, the Khosrogerd minaret was erected in 1111–12 and still reaches to almost 30 m in height. It is all that remains of the Silk Road town of Khosrogerd, obliterated by the Mongols in 1220.

The road west from Sabzevar enters Semnan province and crosses a flat expanse of walnut coloured desert as it skirts the Dasht-e Kevir. All along the east–west highway are the scattered ruins of caravanserais, built to provide sanctuary for the merchants and pilgrims who were making their way to or from Masshad. One of the oldest and best known is Ribat I Sharif, north-east of Masshad on the Merv road. Another Seljuk creation, it was built around 1114–15 on an immense double courtyard plan. Many were built later, most notably during the long reign of the Safavid ruler Shah Abbas I (1571–1629). A large and impressive example of a Safavid period (1502–1722) caravanserai stands beside the Tehran road, about 110 km east of Shahrud (Figure 36). This massive stone and brick structure has a four-*iwan*<sup>1</sup> courtyard arrangement that is also utilised in other large Islamic buildings such as mosques, *madrassahs* and palaces.



**Figure 36**

Miyan Dasht Caravanserai, Semnan province, Iran. Miyan Dasht dates from the Safavid period (1502–1722).

Shahrud is 250 km from Sabzevar and marks the approximate halfway point between Masshad and Tehran. Shahrud is a modern town but its older counterpart, Bastam, is a few kilometres to the north. Part of Bastam's mud-

brick defensive walls still stand but the true source of the town's fame is that it was the birthplace of the Sufi Bayazid-e Bastami (d.874). The shrine complex of Bayazid is grouped around a courtyard on the southern outskirts of the town and its buildings all date to many centuries after his death. The complex comprises a brick Seljuk period minaret with fine decorative geometric bands, and a pair of conical tomb-towers and a mosque built by the Mongol rulers of Persia, the Il-Khans, during the fourteenth century. One of the conical roofed buildings, with its turquoise-blue tiles, is said to mark the location of Bayazid's shrine.

One of the many connecting routes between the main east–west Silk Road and the secondary route along the Caspian runs north from Bastam to Azad Shahr in Golestan province (the eastern half of the former Mazandaran province). The road to Azad Shahr ascends from flat lowland desert through fertile valleys and vast forests and crosses the eastern end of the Alborz Mountains. Just beyond Azad Shahr is the town of Gonbad-e Kavus – home to a structure that, in Robert Byron's view, 'ranks with the great buildings of the world'.

### **Gonbad-e Kavus**

Gonbad-e Kavus, known previously as Jurjan, was once the capital of the Ziyarid dynasty and sat on a trade route leading from the Caspian provinces – north to Khorezm and east to Masshad. The funeral tower that gives the town its name was built in 1006 by Kavus ibn-e Vashmgir (r. c.976–1012), one of the Ziyarid rulers of Tabarestan, a region now comprising the provinces of Mazandaran and Golestan. Kavus was well known as a soldier, poet, philosopher, calligrapher and patron of such scholars as Al-Biruni. He was also notorious for his cruelty and, in 1012, he was slain by a member of the Assassins. He is said to have been sealed inside a glass coffin that was then suspended from the room of the enormous 55 m tower ([Figure 37](#)). During the 1890s, Russian archaeologists sank a 12 m shaft in the foundations but found no trace of Kavus' tomb, lending credence to the legend of the suspended coffin. The brick tower with its grey-green conical roof stands atop a 15 m high mound that can be seen from 30 km away. The interior contains one of the earliest examples of stalactite decoration in an Islamic building.



**Figure 37**

The Gonbad-e Kavus, Golestan province, Iran. Built in 1006.

Kavus (or Qabus) also gave his name to a remarkable text written by his grandson Kai Ka'us Ibn Iskandar, one of the Ziyarid line. Kai Ka'us wrote *Qabus Nama* ('A Mirror for Princes') in 1082, when he was 63 years old, as a guide to correct behaviour for his young son Gilanshah. The book contains advice on such diverse subjects as eating, playing backgammon and chess, romantic passion, playing polo and (most importantly for this book), on the pursuit of commerce. In his preface, Kai Ka'us reveals that he does not expect his son to heed the advice contained in the work but hopes that others will. The Ziyarids faced uncertain times – as vassals of the Seljuks they were forced to pay large sums as tribute and were under constant threat from Turcoman invasion. Gilanshah proved to be the last of the line. After a reign of only seven years he

was overthrown in 1090 but the book remains as a testament to paternal love and integrity. The Ziyarids benefited from Silk Road commerce and, although Kai Ka'us possessed a somewhat disdainful attitude to the merchant class, he recognised their importance to society:

My son, although commerce is not an occupation which can with complete accuracy be called a skilled craft [...] as the Arabs express it, 'Were it not for venturesome men, mankind would perish'. What is meant by these words is that merchants, in their eagerness for gain, bring goods from the east to the west, exposing their lives to peril on mountains and seas, careless of robbers and highwaymen and without fear of living the life of brutal people or of the insecurity of the roads. To benefit the inhabitants of the west they import the wealth of the east and for those of the east the wealth of the west, and by doing so become the instrument of the world's civilization.

(Kai Ka'us Ibn Iskandar, from *A Mirror for Princes (Qabus Nama)*. Translated by Reuben Levy in Kai Ka'us, 1951)

This historical realm of the Ziyarids abuts the modern border with Turkmenistan, and its inhabitants speak Turkmen as readily as Farsi. About 30 km to the north of Gonbad-e Kavus, and close to that border, are the remains of an ancient defensive wall known as Sadd-e Eskinadar ('Alexander's Wall'). The wall has nothing to do with Alexander – it was likely built during the sixth century AD by the Sasanians to protect the Gorgan Plain from nomadic attack. The wall has crumbled or been plundered for building materials but, at approximately 180 km in length, it is still a remarkable feat of engineering.

The highway west from Gonbad-e Kavus leads along the Caspian coast to the town of Gorgan, formerly known as Astarabad ('City of Mules') and capital of the newly created Golestan province. Gorgan is thought to have been established by the Arabs during the eighth century and was once an important caravan town and a place for commerce between Turcoman<sup>2</sup> nomads and Iranians from the plains. The town's proximity to the steppe left it vulnerable to raids by nomads and it has been destroyed and rebuilt a number of times.

In the borderlands of Iran and Turkmenistan the nomads still hold impromptu horse fairs where they buy and sell the spirited Turcoman and Caspian breeds. Recent genetic research in the US (summarised in Firouz, 1995),<sup>3</sup> suggests that Turcoman and Caspian horses share common gene markers with around 90 per cent of modern breeds. This means that Turcoman and Caspian horses are the ancestors of both oriental horses and of Europe's best breeds. There is, in addition, considerable DNA evidence that these two breeds are also the ancestors

of Arab horses. If this is true, the heavenly horses of Ferghana, so beloved of the Chinese emperor, Wudi, are descendants of the Turcoman and Caspian and not the Arab, as is usually written.

The road west from Gorgan follows the Caspian coast through Sari, capital of Mazandaran province, and Rasht, the capital of Guilan. Both Sari and Rasht are linked by road with the main Silk Road to the south. Sari was capital of Tabarestan (now comprising Mazandaran and Golestan provinces) during the Sasanian era, but its surviving buildings date to the latter part of the Islamic era – mostly to the fifteenth century. Rasht is one of the wettest places in Iran and is famous for its tea and silk. It has few buildings of architectural interest and did not become a proper town until the fourteenth century, when the Silk Road was already entering its twilight years. Russian armies have occupied the town on a number of occasions, most recently in 1920 when it was severely damaged by the Bolsheviks. Despite the high level of precipitation in the coastal region, the Alborz Mountains to the south ensure that very little moisture penetrates to the central plateau. The coastal plain contains fertile agricultural land, and fish and game are abundant. But until as late as the nineteenth century the region was so densely forested and so covered by malarial swamp that it was unable to support a large population. The mountains have also left the area somewhat cut off from the rest of Iran and this may explain why the inhabitants were never entirely subjugated by the armies of Islam. For all these reasons the coastal route never offered serious competition to the main Silk Road to the south.

To return to the main Silk Road at Shahrud, the highway continues to skirt the northern edge of the Dasht-e Kevir Desert. Confirming that the modern highway follows the course of the old road is not difficult – there are the remains of earthen ramparts, broken-down fortresses and abandoned caravanserais on both sides of the road for kilometre after kilometre. The desert here is more fertile than the part further east towards Mashhad. In the summer there are patches of green but in winter there is an endless expanse of verdure as far as the eye can see. Some 55 km west of Shahrud is Damghan – the site of Hecatompylos – one of the Greek cities founded by Alexander the Great<sup>4</sup> and home to Iran's oldest mosque.

## Damghan

Discoveries made at Tepe Hissar, south-east of Damghan, indicate that the area has been settled since the third millennium BC. Hecatompylos is on the southern outskirts of the town and is thought to have been one of the settlements founded by Alexander. Alexander's empire quickly disintegrated after his death in 323 BC and by around 312 BC Persia had fallen to one of his generals, Seleucus Nicator (r.312–281 BC). Hecatompylos flourished under the Seleucids and became a capital during the Parthian era (256 BC–AD 226). Parthian rule was more-or-less contemporary with the Han dynasty of China and the development of the global Silk Road during this period meant that the town's prosperity was assured. When Islam came to Iran in the middle of the seventh century, Damghan was still an important city and the country's Abbasid rulers erected a mosque that has survived to the present day. The Tarik Khana ('God's House') Mosque, built around 775, is Iran's oldest and recalls the buildings of the pre-Islamic era (Figure 38). Its simple design consists of an almost square courtyard surrounded by single arcades on three sides and, on the Mecca-facing (*qebila*) side, a prayer hall with triple colonnades. The massive brick columns and high arches are reminiscent of Sasanian buildings.



**Figure 38**

Tarik Khana Mosque, Damghan, Semnan province, Iran. Built c.775.

The remains of a square minaret of the same date, which probably collapsed

during an earthquake, can still be seen beside the mosque. It was replaced just before the Seljuk era by a 25 m high, round minaret that still stands. Judging by the extent of building activity in Damghan just prior to, and during, the Seljuk period, the town seems to have prospered throughout the life of the Silk Road. Despite the depredations of the Mongols, of Timur, of the Afghans during the eighteenth century, and of innumerable earthquakes, several other pre-Seljuk and Seljuk buildings have survived. The Pir-I Alamdar mausoleum was built around 1026 just before the Seljuk conquest of Iran, when the area was still controlled by the Ghaznavids. Its use of decorative brickwork subsequently acted as a model for Seljuk architecture throughout their domains.

By the time that Damghan's other tomb-tower was built, 30 years later, the Seljuks were firmly in control of the former Ghaznavid dominions. The 15 m high Chihil Dukhtaran ('Forty Daughters') tomb-tower, built in 1054–5, continues the use of geometric and calligraphic motifs in brick that was to be the hallmark of Seljuk architecture for the next century and a half.

To the west of Damghan the Silk Road continues for 110 km along the edge of the Dash-Kavir to the town of Semnan, capital of the province and once a major caravan city. It was probably founded during the Sasanian period and still has a thriving bazaar. The Masjed-e Jame ('Friday Mosque') is in the heart of the bazaar – further evidence of the way in which, for the people of the Silk Road, faith and commerce were frequently intertwined. Timur's son Sharukh built the mosque in 1425 but its Seljuk period minaret is much older, dating to the first half of the eleventh century.

The decorative brickwork of this minaret continues the tradition of Damghan's Pir-I Alamdar tomb-tower.

The landscape between Semnan and Tehran, a distance of 228 km, was no more hospitable to ancient travellers and still requires a monotonous journey across scrubby desert. About 50 km south-east of Tehran is the town of Eivanakei (ancient Charax).<sup>5</sup> Near Eivanakei is the Girduni Sudurrah Pass in the Alborz Mountains, at or close to the ancient site of the Caspian Gates. The Gates were one of the most important strategic points of classical times and were a thoroughfare for merchants and conquerors for centuries. The modern road probably runs a few kilometres south of the ancient highway, and therefore the pass as well.

Modern Tehran is a polluted, cacophonous, slightly deranged place, but it was not always thus. The ancient capital of Iran was at Ray, 7 km south-east of Tehran and now absorbed by the suburbs of its newer neighbour. Until 1220, when the Mongols destroyed Ray, Tehran was little more than a village on its outskirts. Many of the displaced citizens of Ray fled to Tehran and it began to grow – although it did not finally achieve prominence until 1795, when the first Qajar ruler Agha Mohammad Khan selected it as the national capital in place of Shiraz. Tehran, like Ray, sits in the southern foothills of the Alborz and on the northern edge of the Dasht-e Kevir Desert. Travellers on the east–west trade routes would have been obliged to pass through the town and this helps to explain why both cities endured in the face of endless invasion and destruction. Most of Tehran’s buildings were built during the Qajar period (1779–1924) or later, and are therefore beyond the scope of this book.

### **Ray (or Shahr-e Ray)**

The former capital of the Persian Empire is now all but lost among the suburbs of Tehran. Under the Achaemenians it was known as Rhaga, or Rhagae, and Alexander rested in the city for five days during his pursuit of their last great king, Darius III. It was expanded during the rule of Seleucus Nicator (r.312–281 BC), founder of the Seleucid dynasty, and renamed Europos. By the second century BC it had become the spring capital of the country’s Parthian rulers, renamed Arsacia and, according to Isidore of Charax,<sup>6</sup> it was ‘the greatest of the cities in Media’.

Ray continued to flourish under the Sasanians and the remains of a citadel can still be seen on a hillside above the town. When the Arabs arrived in the seventh century it became the Abbasid city of Mohamadiyeh, birthplace of the great Abbasid caliph, Harun Al Rashid, in 763. Under the Arabs the city’s artisans continued the tradition of manufacturing exquisite silk textiles begun during the Sasanian era.

By the tenth century Ray was known by its current name and survived capture by Mahmud of Ghazni in 1029 to become a capital of the Seljuks. Ray’s ceramics were admired (and exported) far and wide, especially during the Seljuk period when lustre wares and polychrome painted wares (known as *minai*), were produced in large numbers.

In 1220 the Mongols eviscerated Ray and its inhabitants fled to Tehran, Saveh and Varamin. They spared only one building – an immense 20 m brick funeral tower said to be the mausoleum of the Seljuk ruler Toghrol I and built in 1139. The building, now bereft of its conical dome, was once decorated with typical Seljuk carved brick and Kufic inscriptions, but these are now lost – probably as a result of somewhat reckless repair work conducted during the 1880s. The tower recalls the celebrated mausoleum at Gonbad-e Kavus but, though still beautiful, it is now a shell.

## Varamin

About 40 km south of Tehran on the road from Ray, Varamin sits on a flat, fertile plain. It became the regional capital after the Mongols' destruction of Ray, and remained so until it was superseded by Tehran during the sixteenth century. Its important buildings therefore date to the period between the thirteenth and sixteenth century. They include the Masjed-e Jame ('Friday Mosque'), built by the Mongol Il-Khans between 1322 and 1326: the only such mosque to have been erected by them in one continuous operation. Stevens (1962), saw the building in its unrestored state and described it as 'unquestionably the most interesting building south of the Elburz [Alborz] between Sultaniyeh and Damghan'. It is built in the four-*iwan* style and decorated with brick and glazed tilework. For 80 years, from 1220 to about 1300, the essentially nomadic Mongols built little in Iran. But when activity resumed at the beginning of the fourteenth century it was characterised by a greater use of colour. Glazed tiles and gloriously painted stucco decoration were a feature of the mosques, tombs and palaces of the Il-Khans. Varamin's mosque is dominated by its massive dome, and its *mehrab* (the niche in the Mecca-facing wall) is so richly decorated, according to Arthur Pope, 'that it defies pictorial representation' (1965).

A rare structure from the second half of the thirteenth century stands in the centre of the town. The tomb-tower of Ala AD-Din was completed in 1289 and is decorated in a more restrained manner than the Masjed-e Jame, with a Kufic inscription just below the conical roof and blue faience tilework. The exterior consists of 32 right-angled flanges.

There were two principal directions for the Silk Road beyond Tehran and Ray. The first led north-west through Ghazvin to Tabriz, while the second headed in a south-westerly direction to Hamadan. There were actually two routes to Hamadan: the first via Savé and the other leading up to Ghazvin and then veering off to climb the Amirabad Pass before passing through Darjazin (or Darazin). The road south from Ray passes through Qom, Kashan, Isfahan and beyond, leading eventually to India.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### The Ray–Tabriz Road

## Ghazvin

Some 130 km north-west of Tehran, in Zanjan province, is Ghazvin – a Silk Road city with a past. It lies 1,800 m above sea level, at the north-west corner of the Iranian plateau. This is where the Alborz and Zagros mountains meet and Ghazvin sits on an ancient crossroads – with routes to Tehran, Tabriz, Hamadan and Rasht all radiating from the town. The main Tehran–Baghdad highway ran through Ghazvin – part of a network of roads built by the Achaemenians to link the furthest extremities of their empire.<sup>1</sup>

The city is believed to have been founded by the Sasanian king, Shapur I (r.241–71) and named Shad-I Shapur ('Shapur's Joy'). During the early Islamic period it was repeatedly attacked by a tribe of mountain dwellers from the Alborz known as the Dailamites. After the Arabs captured the town in 644 it became a garrison settlement from which raids were launched against the Dailamites. After they were subjugated the town enjoyed a brief period of peace before enduring new predations at the hands of the Assassins (see the section on [Alamut](#)). The town was sacked by the Mongols in 1220 and again in 1256, flourished briefly as the Safavid capital under Shah Tahmasp in the sixteenth century, and was then attacked yet again by an Afghan army in the eighteenth century. When one considers that the region is also prone to earthquakes, it seems remarkable that anything of old Ghazvin survives at all.

Two Seljuk-era monuments have survived the city's turbulent past. The twelfth-century Madrasah Heidariyeh stands behind high walls in the eastern part of town. It follows the plan of a Sasanian fire-temple, comprising a square hall covered by a dome, but is properly oriented towards Mecca. Its walls are inscribed in stucco relief with Kufic calligraphy and the carved decoration of its *mehrab*, also in stucco, has been described as being the richest and loveliest in Iran.

Ghazvin's other Seljuk monument is the four-*iwan* Masjed-e Jame ('Friday Mosque'), dating to 1113–15. The mosque occupies an area of 4,000 m<sup>2</sup> and was probably built on the site of a pre-Islamic, Zoroastrian fire-temple. Much of the building was built during the Safavid and Qajar periods, well outside the scope of this book, but the prayer hall and sanctuary behind the south *iwan* – covered by a dome 15 m across – date to the Seljuk era. The dome, along with one of

similar diameter in Isfahan, are the largest examples in the Seljuk period in Iran. Its tiles were added later.

## **The Castles of the Assassins**

Where they smile in secret, looking over wasted lands, Blight and famine, plague and earthquake, roaring  
deeps and fiery sands, Clanging fights, and flaming towns, and sinking ships, and praying hands.

(Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 'The Lotos-Eaters')

The Frankish knights who returned to Europe from the Crusades during the eleventh and twelfth centuries carried tales of 'The Old Man of the Mountain', leader of a religious sect known as the Assassins ensconced at a series of mountain fortresses near the source of the Alamut River deep in the Alborz Mountains of northern Iran to the north-east of Ghazvin. The most famous of the castles is Alamut, built around 860 on a rocky outcrop above the village of Gazur Khan, about 80 km north-east of Ghazvin. The name of the sect may derive from the word *hashishiyun* (hashish), the taking of which is said to have enabled the sect's members to carry out the political murders of prominent Muslim figures. The Assassins were an offshoot of the Sevener Shi'ites (followers of the seventh imam, Ismail), and were deemed a threat by the Sunnis. Sevener members were widely persecuted and murders committed by the Assassins were a response to this persecution. Members of the group considered themselves to be guardians of their faith and conducted a campaign of terror that lasted 120 years. In 1092 they murdered Nizam al-Mulk, the prime minister of the Seljuk Turks: a Sunni and a Persian.



**Figure 39**

Alamut, Castle of the Assassins, north-east of Chazvin, Zanjan province, Iran.

The killing was ordered by the Old Man of the Mountain himself, Hasan-I Sabah (c.1040–1124). The Assassins resisted numerous attempts to dislodge them and continued to operate from Alamut until 1256, when they were slaughtered by the Mongols. Marco Polo left a vivid description of the Old Man's acolytes – left insensate by opiates and by the carnal pleasures of the sect's handmaidens: When any of the neighbouring princes, or others, gave umbrage to this chief, they were put to death by these his disciplined assassins; none of whom felt terror at the risk of losing their own lives, which they held in little estimation, provided they could execute their master's will.

(From *The Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian*. Translated by William Marsden in Polo, 1948)  
Sultanieh

The road from Ghazvin heads north-west across mostly flat terrain to the town of Zanjan. What earthquakes and Mongol armies have left of Zanjan is of scant appeal to historians but 40 km south-east of the town, just off the main route to Tabriz, is one of Iran's most spectacular monuments. At Sultanieh, the mausoleum of Il-Khan Sultan Uljaitu (r.1304–17) dominates the plain and announces the power of the Mongols to all who look upon it. Completed in 1313, the building is over 50 m high and consists of a pointed egg-shape dome

atop a massive octagon with a minaret at each corner – a new development over the customary, square gallery hitherto seen in structures of this type. It is incredible to think that the entire building, including the dome, is made of brick. A number of commentators have remarked on the manner in which the deep, pierced niches of the supporting walls suffuse the building, despite its massive size, with a sense of lightness: ‘The lower courses merge with the neutral tones of the ground and mountains, but above these the blue dome, vivid and gleaming with its brilliant crown of minarets, seems to float in the sky’ (André Godard in Pope and Ackerman, 1964–5).

The dome has lost most of its turquoise blue tiles but still presents an impressive sight. This is precisely what Uljaitu intended. His mother was a Christian who had Uljaitu baptised with the name Nicholas. He later became a Sunni Muslim and then, probably in 1309, converted to Shi’ism. His original intention was to transfer the remains of Ali (son-in-law of the Prophet) and Hossein – the first and third imams revered by Shi’ites – from their resting places in Iraq to the Sultanieh mausoleum. But the citizens of Nejef and Karbala, where the remains were enshrined, refused to part with them and the plan came to nothing. Uljaitu returned to Sunnism before his death and was buried in the great mausoleum.

Sultanieh has withstood time, earthquakes and the depredations of the Timurids, who sacked the town in 1384. Arthur Pope described it as ‘one of Persia’s supreme architectural achievements’ (Pope, 1965) and the great buildings that were to come – the Taj Mahal among them – owe an immense debt to Uljaitu and his architects.

Beyond Sultanieh the flat plain of the desert is left behind, the landscape becomes rich and green, and the road becomes more undulating as it enters the provinces of Azerbaijan. Iranian Azerbaijan (now further divided into East and West provinces) occupies the north-western corner of Iran, an area of about 100,000 km<sup>2</sup>. It is bordered to the north by the Aras River, which divides Iranian Azerbaijan from the independent, former Soviet republic. Azerbaijan has long been a centre of civilisation. It formed part of Urartu and later of Media and, in the fourth century BC, was conquered by Alexander the Great. Alexander renamed the region Atropatene after one of his generals, Atropates, who established a satrapy. During the third century AD it fell under Sasanian rule and

was then under Arab control from the seventh to the eleventh century. In the eleventh century it fell to Turkish nomads and, ever since, has been a predominantly Turkish-speaking area. When the Mongols arrived in 1220, Azerbaijan became part of their empire. Under Hulāgu, brother of Khan Mangu and first of the Il-Khans, Azerbaijan was situated at the core of a Mongol Khanate extending from Syria to the Oxus. The capital of the khanate was, for a long period, at Tabriz – a Silk Road city with a long and illustrious history.

## Tabriz

The town, now capital of East Azerbaijan province (Azerbaijan-e Sharqi), is 280 km north-west of Zanjan and 625 km from Tehran. It sits at 1,300 m within a fertile valley to the north of Mount Sahand (3,707 m) and enjoys mild summers but exceptionally harsh winters. The volcanic soils of Mount Sahand have made its water brackish and generations of the town's inhabitants have had to bring water from a long distance away by aqueducts (*qanats*). The town has also endured earthquakes throughout its history, most notably in 858 and 1041 – when the town was all but destroyed – and there are few surviving monuments as a result. The traditional founders of Tabriz were the Sasanians but it seems more likely that the Arabs were the first to develop the town. It flourished under the Seljuks, and under the Mongol Il-Khans (1256–1335) it was, for a time, capital not only of Azerbaijan but also of the entire khanate. During the *Pax Mongolica* of the Il-Khans, Silk Road trade boomed and the few early buildings that survive date to this era. The Masjed-e Kabud ('Blue Mosque') was completed in 1465 and is justly famous for its beautiful faience tilework. But it has since been virtually destroyed by earthquakes and what one sees today is the result of recent renovation. The massive, tottering bulk of the Arg-e Tabriz (or Arg-e Alishah) is all that remains of the Masjed-e Ali Shah, built in 1310 by Uljaitu's vizier and once one of the largest mosques ever constructed. Within a few years most of the structure fell victim to an earthquake and all that can be seen today is a single wall of the citadel, 35 m in height. It stands somewhat forlornly in a car park in the centre of the town.

Under the Il-Khans, Tabriz was a vibrant, cosmopolitan place and most commercial activity was focused on the bazaar. The narrow, bustling passageways through it extend for 3 km. It has existed for at least 1,000 years but the present structure, with its high domes and arches, dates mostly to the fifteenth century. Two guests of the Il-Khans, Marco Polo in about 1294 and Ibn Battuta in 1334, have left descriptions of the town during its heyday. Marco Polo called Tabriz 'Tauris', and his description suggests that the town's *raison d'être* was trade: The inhabitants support themselves principally by commerce and manufactures, which latter consist of various kinds of silk, some of them interwoven with gold, and of high price. It is so advantageously situated for

trade, that merchants from India, from Baldach [Baghdad], Mosul [also in Iraq], Cremessor [presumably Kermanshah], as well as from different parts of Europe, resort thither to purchase and to sell a number of articles. Precious stones and pearls in abundance may be procured at this place. The merchants concerned in foreign commerce acquire considerable wealth, but the inhabitants in general are poor.

(From *The Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian*. Translated by William Marsden in Polo, 1948) The peripatetic Ibn Battuta (1304–77), an Arab from Tangier, visited Tabriz's bazaar in 1334 and seems to have been somewhat stunned by what he saw: I passed through the jeweller's bazaar, and my eyes were dazzled by the varieties of precious stones that I beheld. They were displayed by beautiful slaves wearing rich garments with a waist-sash of silk, who stood in front of the merchants, exhibiting the jewels to the Turks' wives, who bought them in large quantities to outdo each other. A riot broke out among them – may Allah preserve us from such a din! We went on to the ambergris market, and witnessed the same rowdiness, if anything even worse.

(Ibn Battuta. Translated by H. A. R. Gibb in Ibn Battuta, 1929) The bazaar has since been rebuilt but is still one of the finest markets of the entire Silk Road.

Marco Polo refers to the existence of a Christian monastery, 'Saint Barsamo', near Tabriz, although its identity remains unclear. There are, however, six churches still in existence in the town – nineteenth- or twentieth-century structures – but at least one of them, St Mary (Kelisa-ye Maryam-e Moghaddas), is built on the site of a much older church.

### **Three Poets: Nizami, Saadi and Hafiz**

The Seljuk and Mongol eras were a time of unprecedented contact with neighbouring countries. People were forcibly relocated from one city to another but there was also a large amount of pan-Asian trade conducted at those times when the routes were safe for merchants to travel. A number of the Persian world's greatest poets flourished during this period and the content of their work reveals the cosmopolitan nature of life in the Silk Road towns of the twelfth to fourteenth century, much as was the case in the poetry of Tang dynasty writer Changan (Xian). Arguably the three best poets of the age were Nizami, Saadi and Hafiz, and a brief sampling of their work will demonstrate that, despite a constant cycle of invasion and political intrigue, there existed a spirit of internationalism and a profound awareness of the customs and traditions of other lands.

### Nizami

The romance of the *Haft Paykar* ('The Seven Beauties') is one of the most beautifully descriptive epic poems in all of Persian literature. It was completed in 1197 by the poet Nizami of the Azerbaijani town of Ganja (now Gyandzha), and its principal theme is the idea that self-knowledge can place one on the path to wisdom and perfection. The poem tells the story of Bahram V (r.420–38), the Sasanian king, who was born to Yazdegerd I after years of childlessness. Bahram is sent to be educated in Yemen and there, within a locked room in a castle, he discovers seven portraits of the most beautiful women he has ever seen. The portrayals are of princesses from every corner of the Silk Road: Furak, the daughter of the Rajah of India; Yaghma Naz, daughter of the *khagan* of the Turks; Naz Pari, daughter of the king of Khwarezm; Nasrin Nush, daughter of the king of the Slavs; Azar-Gun, daughter of the king of Morocco; Humay, daughter of the Roman Caesar; and Dursiti, a beautiful Iranian princess from the House of Kai Ka'us. He falls in love with them all and when he ascends the throne contrives to marry them. Each lady is installed in a pavilion and the poem describes his visits to them, each on a particular day of the week, when they entertain him with stories in the manner of Sheherazade of *The Thousand and One Nights*.

Nizami did not travel to the places he describes but his creations are an imaginative *tour de force*. Princess Yaghma Naz tells Bahram the story of a king in Iraq whom the astrologers have warned of the dire consequences that would follow should he ever decide to take a wife. Instead he tries to content himself with a succession of slave-girls purchased from all corners of the globe. None prove to be suitable, due largely to the machinations of an old woman who panders to the girls' vanity to create turmoil at court. In the following extract a slave trader arrives with 1,000 slave-girls from Chinese Central Asia, among them a young woman of exquisite beauty who will eventually become consort to the king: Until one day a man who dealt in slaves brought information to a royal slave That from the picture-house of China's realm<sup>2</sup> a merchant had with thousand *huris* come.

Virgin slave-girls of countries different: some of Khallukh,<sup>3</sup> some also of Cathay.

Each one, in face, a world-illuminating sun; a love-compeller, one who lovers burnt.

Among them a young slave-girl like a fay, who from the morning star had borne off light.

An eye-browed (slave-girl) (best) as un-browed people, surprised by the moon, called at a life.

An ear-bored (slave-girl), (out) an unbored pearl; appraised by the pearl-seller at a lire.  
Her lips like coral – (coral) clasped with pearls; bitter in answer she, but sweet in smile.  
One who bestowing sugar-sprinkling smiles, makes all eat (only) sugar many years.

(From *Haft Paykar* ('The Seven Beauties') by Nizami Ganjavi (c.1140–1209). Translated by C. E. Wilson in Nizami, 1924) *Saadi*

A near contemporary of Nizami, the author Saadi (1207–91), though little known in the West is one of Iran's most treasured writers and is still widely quoted in everyday conversation. He wrote two of the world's greatest masterpieces – *Golestan* ('The Garden of Roses'), a mixture of prose and verse, and *Bustan* ('The Orchard'), a *masnavi* or continuous narrative poem. His writings are suffused with wit and insight into the vanity and foibles of man. Unlike Nizami, he was a traveller – studying for a number of years in Baghdad and living out his last years in his birthplace, Shiraz. His wry observations of the greed and hyperbole of merchants during the boom years of the *Pax Mongolica* are a delight. He recounts the tale of the merchant he meets on the Persian Gulf island of Kish, who boasts of his plans to make a business trip so lucrative that its proceeds will enable him to retire: 'I want to carry Persian brimstone to China, where I have heard it bears a very high price; from thence I will transport China ware to Greece, and take the brocades of Greece to India, and Indian steel to Aleppo. The glassware of Aleppo I will convey to Yemen, and from thence go with striped cloths to Persia; after which I will leave off trade and sit down in my shop.' [...] I replied: 'Have you not heard that once upon a time a merchant, as he was travelling in the desert, fell from his camel? He said that the covetous eye of the worldly man is either satisfied through contentment or will be filled with the earth of the grave.'

(Saadi (1207–91). Translated by Reuben Levy, in Kritzeck, 1964) *Hafiz*

Sweet maid, if thou would'st charm my sight, And bid these arms thy neck infold;  
That rosy cheek, that lily hand,  
Would give thy poet more delight  
Than all Bokhara's vaunted gold,  
Than all the gems of Samarkand.

Boy, let yon liquid ruby flow,  
And bid thy pensive heart be glad,  
Whate'er the frowning zealots say:  
Tell them, their Eden cannot show  
A stream so clear at Rocnabad,  
A bower so sweet as Mosellay.

(From 'Oh Turkish Maid', an ode from *Divan* ('Poetic Works') by Hafiz (1320–89 or 1390). Translated by Sir William Jones, in Arberry, 1954) Like Saadi, Hafiz was born and died in Shiraz. He is revered as Iran's greatest lyric poet and perfected the form of verse known as the *ghazal*. One critic summarises his appeal thus, 'His poems project at once the sweetness of the joys of this world and its inadequacies'.

During his lifetime he was known and admired throughout the Islamic world but he does not appear to have travelled, and remained, like Nizami, a voyager of the mind. In contrast to the breeziness of the last quotation, some of Hafiz's poetry has an intensity that is almost unbearable: Not all the changes that thy days unfold

Shall rouse thy wonder; Time's revolving sphere Over a thousand lives like thine has rolled.  
That cup within thy fingers, dost not hear  
The voices of dead kings speak through the clay?  
Kobad, Bahman, Djemshid, their dust is here.  
'Gently upon me set thy lips!' they say.

What man can tell where Káús and Kai have gone?  
Who knows where even now the restless wind  
Scatters the dust of Djem's imperial throne?  
And where the tulip, followed close behind  
The feet of Spring, her scarlet chalice rears, There Ferhad for the love of Shirin pined,  
Dyeing the desert red with his heart's tears.

Bring, bring the cup! drink we while yet we may To our soul's ruin the forbidden draught  
Perhaps a treasure-trove is hid away  
Among those ruins where the wine has laughed!— Perhaps the tulip knows the fickleness  
Of Fortune's smile, for on her stalk's green shaft She bears a wine-cup through the wilderness.  
The murmuring stream of Ruknabad, the breeze That blows from out Mosalla's fair pleasaunce,  
Summon me back when I would seek heart's ease, Travelling afar; what though Love's countenance Be  
turned full harsh and sorrowful on me,  
I care not so that Time's unfriendly glance  
Still from my Lady's beauty turned be.

Like Hafiz, drain the goblet cheerfully  
While minstrels touch the lute and sweetly sing, For all that makes thy heart rejoice in thee Hangs of  
Life's single, slender, silken string.

('Comfort' or 'The Secret Draught of Wine' by Hafiz (1320–89 or 1390). Translated by Gertrude Bell,<sup>4</sup>  
in Arberry, 1954) Like Omar Khayyam, Hafiz's poetry became popular in Victorian England. The  
author, Richard Le Gallienne (1866–1947), wrote exquisite verse based loosely on Hafiz's poems: A  
caravan from China comes;

For miles it sweetens all the air  
With fragrant silks and dreaming gums,  
Attar and myrrh –  
A caravan from China comes.

O merchant, tell me what you bring,  
With music sweet of camel bells;  
How long have you been travelling  
With these sweet smells?  
O merchant, tell me what you bring.

A lovely lady is my freight,  
A lock escaped of her long hair, –

That is this perfume delicate  
That fills the air –  
A lovely lady is my freight.

Her face is from another land,  
I think she is no mortal maid, –  
Her beauty, like some ghostly hand,  
Makes me afraid;  
Her face is from another land.

The little moon my cargo is,

About her neck the Pleiades  
Clasp hands and sing; Hafiz, 't is this  
Perfumes the breeze –  
The little moon my cargo is.

(‘A Caravan from China comes (After Hafiz)’ by Richard Le Gallienne, 1866–1947) The Way South  
from Tabriz

### *Marageh*

Tabriz was not the Il-Khanid capital for the whole Mongol era. The first capital of the Il-Khans was at Marageh, 130 km south of Tabriz and close to Lake Orumieh, the largest lake in Iran. The first of the Il-Khans, Hulagu (r.1256–65), built an observatory at Marageh known as the Rasat-Khaneh or ‘Star House’. Established in 1259, the remains are still visible on a hill to the west of the town; it predates Ulugh Beg’s observatory in Samarkand by 200 years.

The Mongols pastured their ponies around Marageh and this is probably where the town gets its name (‘the village of pasturage’). Strangely enough, given the destructive tendencies of the Mongols, all of the surviving monuments but one are Seljuk. The town’s pride and joy are four tomb-towers; there was once a fifth, which collapsed in 1938. The oldest is the Gonbad-e Sorkh (‘Red Tower’), built in 1148 and noted for the brilliance of its decorative brickwork. André Godard (1965) believes that its glazed external ornament is the first occurrence of such decoration in northern Iran. The Gonbad-e Sorkh was built on the orders of Sa’d Badim, ruler of Azerbaijan at the time.

The Borj-e Khohar-I (or Madar-I, ‘Cylindrical Tower’) is Marageh’s second oldest; a Kufic inscription above the entrance dating it to 1167–8. The tower is a simple cylinder but is embellished with turquoise tiles. Beside it is the Gonbad-e Kabud (‘Blue Tower’), dating to 1196–7. It is traditionally believed to be the tomb of Hulagu’s mother, but this is impossible given its early date. The Gonbad-e Kabud is decorated over almost its entire surface with ornamental brickwork and its designs are highlighted with tile mosaic.

The fourth and final tower, the Gonbad-e Ghaffarieh, stands beside the Safi Chai River and dates to the Il-Khanid period. It was completed around 1328 and is richly decorated with black, white and blue glazed bricks set in plaster. The Gonbad-e Ghaffarieh is thought to have been constructed for Shams od-din Karasunkur al-Mansouri, viceroy of Syria, who sought refuge in Iran in 1311.

There are two principal routes to the south from Marageh. One leads through the Kurdish town of Sanandaj (formerly Sehna) to Kermanshah; the second passes through the town of Takab to Hamadan. Sanandaj was the capital of Kurdistan during the medieval period but there is little remaining of the old town. Takab, too, has little to offer by way of ancient remains but 40 km north of the town is the remote, mysterious Takht-e Suleiman – one of Iran's most important ancient sites.

### *Takht-e Suleiman ('Throne of Solomon')*

The fortified settlement of Takht-e Suleiman in West Azerbaijan province (Azerbaijan-e Gharbi) occupies an area of 12 hectares and comprises remains from the Parthian, Sasanian and Mongol periods. The site is at an altitude of 2,400 m in an area dominated by a remarkable conical hill known as Zendan-e Suleiman (Solomon's Prison'). Takht-e Suleiman contains a Sasanian palace and Zoroastrian fire-temple as well as Il-Khanid buildings, all clustered around a glistening blue lake, about 100 m across.

The inner, mud-brick fortifications date to the Parthian era but were enclosed by a Sasanian-era stone wall with 38 towers, the remains of which still stand. Pottery shards found at the site indicate that it was occupied much earlier – around the sixth century BC – and scholars believe that Takht-e Suleiman may be the Parthian city of Praaspa. Mark Antony attacked, but failed to subjugate Praaspa in 36 BC. Throughout its history it has been an important religious centre and pilgrimage site. The Sasanian kings, with their court at Ctesiphon near modern Baghdad, would come to pay homage at Takht-e Suleiman, reputedly the site of both the Atur-Gushnasp ('King of the Warriors') fire-altar and Zoroaster's birthplace. The remains of the fire-temple sit on the northern shore of the lake and have walls almost 4 m thick.

The main entrance gate to Takht-e Suleiman was built during the Sasanian era when it was known as Shiz. The Mongols, who called the town Saturiq, reinforced the walls, strengthened the gate and added a Kufic inscription.

Returning to Tabriz, this branch of the Silk Road continues on north-westwards through Maku to the Turkish frontier. Around Maku are several, centuries-old, Armenian churches. The most important is the St Thaddeus Church and Monastery, known locally as Kara Kelisa (the 'Black Church') and

situated about 18 km south of Maku. The church has been rebuilt many times but part of it dates to the tenth century. Armenian legend relates that the Apostle Thaddeus journeyed here in AD 66 and built what is claimed to be the world's first Christian church.

The modern frontier with Turkey is at Bazargan, in the shadow of the 5,137 m high Mount Ararat.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# The Ray–Hamadan Road

As we have seen, the road from Ray to Hamadan followed two routes – the first via Savé; and the other heading to Ghazvin and then turning south through the Amirabad Pass and passing through Darjazin (or Darazin). Both routes cross arid plain but there are also green oases fed by water from underground irrigation channels known in Xinjiang as *kariz*, and in Iran as *qanats*. Savé is a quiet town, but at the end of the twelfth century it was the winter capital of the Seljuks during their twilight years. The town was an important caravan city on the road to Baghdad and was renowned for its pottery. There was also a road from Savé to Isfahan. Two Seljuk minarets survive in Savé – one on the outskirts attached to the Masjed-e Jame (‘Friday Mosque’) and dated 1110–11; and the second in the centre at the Masjed-e Maidan. The first is said by a number of commentators to be Iran’s finest; and the second was built in 1061, the oldest dated Seljuk minaret in the country.

The town was destroyed by the Mongols, but was then rebuilt by them by the time Marco Polo passed through later in the thirteenth century. He called the town ‘Saba’ and relates that the Magi, the Three Wise Men of the New Testament, set out from there with gifts for the infant Christ. The same claim has been made about Kashan in Isfahan province. Marco Polo goes on to relate a local legend that the Three Wise Men were buried in Savé, but no evidence of this has ever been produced.

The second route passes through Darjazin (Darazin); a small town about 65 km from Hamadan noted for its two Mongol tomb structures – the Hud Tower and the Azhar Tower – both dating to the fourteenth century. The two routes from Ray combine at the town of Rowan. The 3,570 m Mount Alvand dominates the approach across cultivated plains to Hamadan, arguably the most important and ancient of all of Iran’s Silk Road cities.

## **Hamadan (Ecbatan)**

Hamadan has one of the highest elevations and therefore one of the mildest summer climates of any Iranian town. This has ensured its survival as a major metropolis for two-and-a-half millennia. The founding of Hamadan is attributed to a king of the Median Empire. The Median Empire, occupying western Iran and Southern Azerbaijan province, emerged in about 800 BC; around the seventh century BC they established their capital at Ecbatan (a Greek word meaning ‘The Place of Assembly’), now submerged beneath the modern city of Hamadan. Little is known about the Medes – they left no written records – but they are believed to have been an Indo-European people who spoke an Iranian language related to Old Persian. During the seventh century BC they extended their rule over Persia, and in 612 BC captured the Assyrian capital of Nineveh – putting an end to that empire. In 550 BC the Medes were overthrown by Cyrus the Great and became part of the Achaemenian Empire, and during the second century BC Media became part of the Parthian kingdom.

Both the Achaemenians and Parthians developed Hamadan, each adopting the city as their summer capital. What remains of Median and Achaemenian Ecbatan is to be found on Hegmatana Hill (Tappe-ye Hekmatane), a mound in the centre of the city. The royal citadel of ancient Ectaban was said to have been surrounded by seven defensive walls, with the innermost two being coated with gold and silver. At Hegmatana Hill only earthen walls remain and even these (when we visited in 2000) were rapidly disappearing under layers of new mud applied by gangs of labourers. The old walls were ‘conserved’ by the application of this new layer so that they now resemble a half-eaten cake that has been re-iced.

The discovery of foundation tablets, gold and silver drinking vessels, and jewellery – all from the Achaemenian era – suggests that the great kings kept their treasuries at Ecbatan. At Ganjnameh, 5 km from Hamadan on the slopes of Mount Alvand, are two Achaemenian-era inscriptions that refer to Darius the Great and to Xerxes; but these, and the depleted remnants of Hegmatana Hill, are all that is left of the city’s illustrious past.

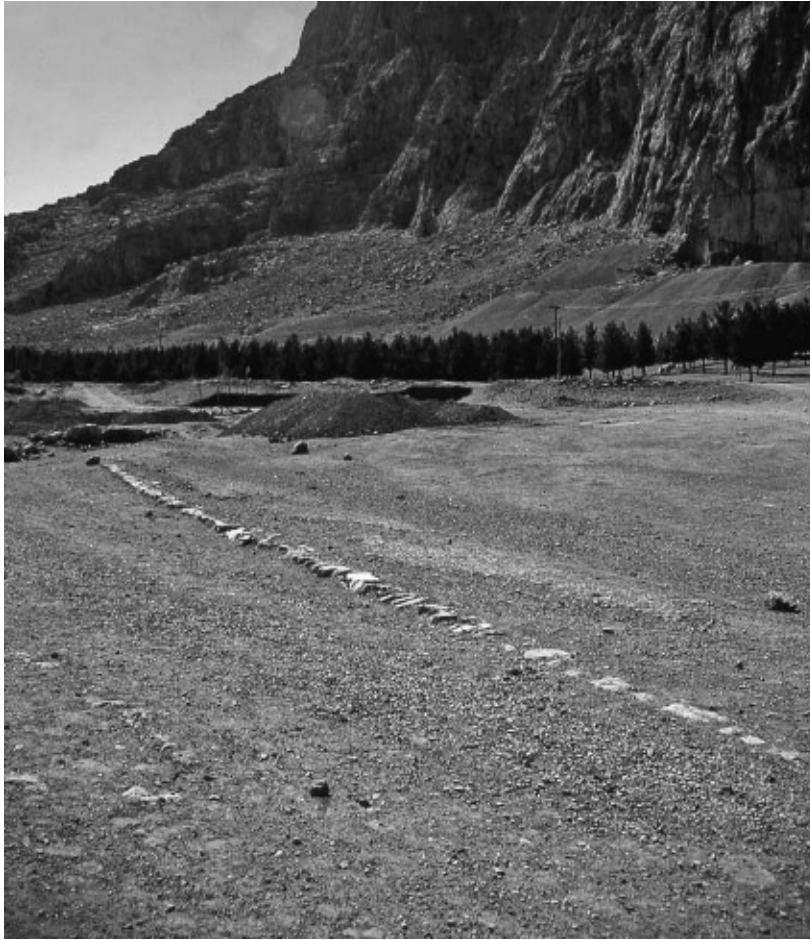
Just to the south-east of Hegmatana Hill is Mosalla Hill (Tappe-ye Mosalla), thought to have been the site of a Parthian period temple dedicated to Anahita (or Anaitis, the Zoroastrian goddess of the waters, procreation and fertility). The

only ancient relic of substantial size is the massive, 3.51 m Sang-e Shir ('Stone Lion') that sits in a square in the south-eastern part of the city, a stone's throw from Mosalla Hill. Variouslly ascribed to Alexander the Great or the Parthians, it is still recognisable despite many centuries of rubbing by wistful Hamadanis. According to the Arab commentator Masudi (d.956), the lion used to stand beside the 'Lion Gate' (Bib al-Asad) on a low hill overlooking the road to Ray and Khorasan.

There has been a Jewish community in Hamadan at least as far back as the Sasanian era and a small number still remain – many engaged in the manufacture and sale of jewellery in the bazaar. The Mausoleum of Esther and Mordecai, just west of the central square, is built in Islamic style but is actually the most important Jewish shrine in Iran and was once a place of international pilgrimage. The occupants of the tomb are traditionally believed to be Esther, Jewish queen of the Achaemenian ruler Xerxes (486–465 BC) and her uncle Mordecai, both of whom secured protection for the Jews of the Persian Empire. Most scholars now agree that Esther was in fact interred in Susa and that the crypt contains the remains of Shushan Dokht, the Jewish wife of the Sasanian ruler Yazdegerd I (r.399–420).

One of history's most sublime geniuses, Ibn Sina, or Avicenna (980–1037), lived in Hamadan for several years. His greatest work, *Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb*, known in the West as the 'Canon', was written during his residence here and he is buried in the town in a simple tomb covered by an elaborate modern structure.

Under the Seljuks, Hamadan was the capital for 50 years – but the depredations of the Mongols in the thirteenth century, the Timurids in the fourteenth, the Turks in the eighteenth, and earthquakes throughout its history, have meant that little trace of that era remains. A rare and beautiful exception is the Gunbad-i Alaviyan, a four-sided tomb built on the site of a Dervish monastery to house the mortal remains of generations of the Alavi clan, rulers of Hamadan for 200 years. The stucco ornamentation of the *mehrab* and the intricate geometric and floral decoration of the exterior are among the most beautiful in Iran. There is some dispute over the building's age – dates from the twelfth to the fourteenth century have been ascribed to it.



**Figure 40**

The exposed foundation stones of the Royal Road at Bisotun, Kermanshah province, Iran. A colossal blank relief, attributed to Khusrau II (r.591–628), is visible beyond the road.

Beyond Hamadan, the Silk Road ascends the Abbassabad Pass and traverses Kangavar, now a small town with a large Kurdish population but once the site of a Parthian era temple dedicated to Anahita (or Artemis, the goddess of the waters, procreation and fertility). After Kangavar the road continues through Kermanshah province, and 30 km before Kermanshah town it passes the huge, vertical sand-coloured cliffs at Bisotun. The cliffs at Bisotun, the Baghistanon Oros or ‘Mountain of the Gods’, overlook the Royal Road to Ctesiphon. During recent work to improve the modern road surface the foundations of the ancient highway were briefly exposed – an extraordinary and possibly unique glimpse of the Silk Road as it once looked (Figure 40).

High above the road, Darius the Great left inscriptions in Babylonian, Elamite and Old Persian. They commemorate Darius’s defeat of the usurper Gaumata in

522 BC and list the names of the former's ancestors. A bas-relief shows Darius towering above the prostrated body of Gaumata while the nine governors who had contested the great king's right to the throne are chained before him. In part of one inscription, Darius declares: 'Eight of my family were kings before me. I am the ninth. We inherit kingship on both sides'.

A smaller Parthian relief with three figures and a large, Seleucid period, reclining Hercules are lower down the cliff, and there are also Sasanian remains. The Sasanian king, Khusrau II (r.591–628), seems to have been the architect of a vast blank panel, measuring 220 m x 55 m, carved onto the cliff-face at Bisotun. It was never completed, perhaps because of Khusrau's death.

Beside the old road to Kermanshah in the southern part of the site is an intact seventeenth-century caravanserai built beside the remains of a much older one. The Mongols also erected a stopping place for caravan traffic and the remains are still discernible. The beautiful Safavid period (1502–1722) bridge spanning the river to the north of the caravanserai is built on Sasanian-era foundations and reveals the original course of the old Royal Road that runs along the cliff-base.

### **Kermanshah (Bakhtaran)**

Kermanshah is now a city of almost 800,000, mainly Kurdish, inhabitants. The town's occupation of a strategic position on the old caravan road to Baghdad has brought it great prosperity but has also left it vulnerable to attack. The Arabs sacked Kermanshah in 649, the Buyids attacked it in the tenth century, the Seljuks in the eleventh and the Mongols in the thirteenth. It was also pulverised by Iraqi missile and bomb attacks during the Iran–Iraq War and, as a result, nothing remains of the old town. There is an important archaeological site just outside it, however – the monumental Sasanian rock reliefs at Taq-e Bostan, ('The Arch of the Garden'), 5 km to the north-east.

### **Taq-e Bostan**

With one other exception, Taq-e Bostan's reliefs are the only Sasanian rock-carvings outside Fars province. They decorate two grottoes cut into a cliff beside a large pool and are a continuation of a tradition begun by the Achaemenians in which monumental reliefs are utilised to proclaim the power of the throne and the divine right of its occupant to rule. The famous sixth century BC

Achaemenian bas-relief from the treasury at Persepolis – now housed in the National Museum in Tehran – shows Darius the Great with a Median official and is the prototype for the Taq-e Bostan carvings.

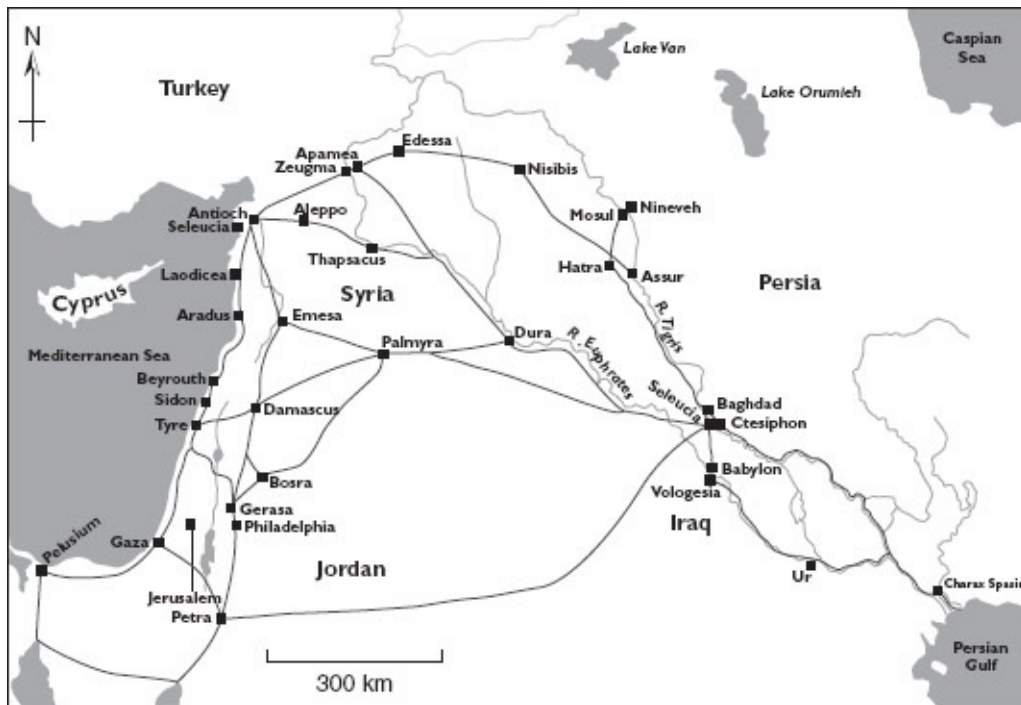
The garden at Taq-e Bostan contains fragments of Sasanian capitals and broken statuary – probably from Bisotun and other nearby sites. But the most interesting part of the site are the bas-reliefs carved within the two grottoes and on the exterior wall just to their right. The influences are Byzantine, Roman and possibly Greek as well. The exterior relief, measuring 3 m x 5.5 m, represents the investiture of Ardashir II (r.379–83), the brother<sup>1</sup> of one of the greatest of all the Sasanian kings: Shapur II. Ardashir II came to the throne at an advanced age and was quickly deposed – the rather triumphalist tone of this relief was perhaps an attempt to bolster his position as ruler. In this relief the Zoroastrian deity Ahura Mazda stands to the right and presents the crown to Ardashir while, to the left, Mithra stands holding a sacred bunch of twigs, known as the *barsom*. Beneath their feet is a prostrated figure, perhaps a defeated Roman soldier.

The cave to the left of the Ardashir relief is the smaller and later of the two grottoes. On the back wall of the right hand cave are two figures leaning on their swords – Shapur II ('The Great', r.309–79) and his son Shapur III (r.383–8) (though see note 1). An inscription in Pahlavi, identifying the two rulers, accompanies this relief.

The largest cave was the last to be carved and was almost certainly intended to occupy the centre part of a triptych, the left hand part of which was never completed. In the cave, the back wall is carved with a king on horseback – probably Khusrau II (r.591–628) surnamed Parviz ('The Ever Victorious'), the last great Sasanian ruler before the advent of Islam. Khusrau conducted a war against Byzantium, during which his armies reached Chalcedon (modern Kadikoy, opposite Constantinople) and captured Antioch, Damascus and Jerusalem. In the lower section of the Taq-e Bostan relief, Khusrau sits in full armour astride his favourite horse, Shabdiz, a lance in his hands; while above him the same ruler is invested with his crown by Ahura Mazda and Anahita, goddess of the waters.

The entrance to the cave is decorated with 'Tree of Life' motifs with acanthus leaves that we have seen in a number of works of art in this book. Above them are two cornucopias and at the apex of the arch is a royal crescent flanked by

two winged figures bearing diadems and cups. The motifs on both the façade and interior of this cave resemble Roman (Byzantine) art so strongly that it seems highly likely that artists from Constantinople were responsible. One source, the poet and traveller Al-Hamadhani (968–1008), reported that the sculptor was one Fatus (or Katus) ibn Sinimmar Rumi (i.e. a man of Byzantine Rome).



**MAP 11**

Trade routes of the Near East (Adapted from Rostovtzeff, 1932).

On the left wall of the cave is a scene of Khusrau II hunting wild boar in a swamp and on the right the same ruler appears in pursuit of deer. Probably dating to the late sixth or early seventh century, the reliefs show various stages of the royal hunt – in one the king stands in a boat firing an arrow at wild boar while musicians perform an accompaniment. Elephants and camels are used extensively and can be seen participating in the hunt and carrying off the spoils. Boatloads of women appear to perform a ‘cheerleading’ function.

On the left hand wall towards the rear is a much later relief that still retains its original colours. It was added during the nineteenth century by the Qajars and is perhaps an attempt to bask in some of the reflected glory of the Sasanians.

The westward road from Kermanshah departs the borders of modern Iran and leads through the Zagros Mountains to the Mesopotamian plateau, and Baghdad.

The Zagros Mountains are a series of parallel ranges, extending for 900 km across south-western Iran. They rise to about 3,900 m and have acted as a natural barrier for millennia.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The End of the Road: The Silk Road in  
Decline When those long caravans that  
cross the plain With dauntless feet and  
sound of silver bells Put forth no more  
for glory or for gain,

Take no more solace from the palm-girt wells.

When the great markets by the sea shut fast All that calm Sunday that goes on and on:

When even lovers find their peace at last, And Earth is but a star, that once had shone.

(James Elroy Flecker, 'The Golden Journey to Samarkand') The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous  
palaces, The solemn temples, the great globe itself, Ye all which it inherit, shall dissolve.

(William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act IV, Scene 1) The death in 1449 of Ulugh Beg, grandson of Timur, was one of a number of events that brought about the final decline of the Silk Road. After Ulugh Beg's passing the Timurid Empire finally disintegrated as town after town fell to the Uzbeks, and the absence of centralised control in Central Asia meant that the safety of merchants along the trade routes could no longer be guaranteed. Caravans were forced to hire an armed escort, resulting in higher costs. To the west, Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, bringing the Byzantine Empire to an end and bringing the eastern Mediterranean under Muslim control. All east-west trade was now compelled to pass through Ottoman territory and this resulted in an additional financial burden on merchants in the form of tolls and taxes. The European trading powers began to seek ways to evade the Ottoman monopoly and to reduce these costs, ushering in an era of maritime exploration that would transform the way in which trade would be conducted during the coming centuries. The first voyages had already begun during the early part of the fifteenth century, sponsored by Prince Henry 'The Navigator' of Portugal, to seek gold, ivory and slaves, and in 1415 the Portuguese captured the Moorish city of Ceuta on the northern coast of Africa. Emboldened by their success they began to explore the African coastline and in 1487 Bartolomeu Dias became the first European to round the Cape of Good Hope – he was actually blown round it in a storm. He was followed in 1497–8 by Vasco da Gama, discoverer of the maritime route to India, and in 1510 the Portuguese captured Goa, quickly followed in 1511 by the Malay port of Malacca – both becoming important bases for trade with the East. Under the newly founded Mughal Empire the Portuguese were granted trading rights and by the 1540s, they were engaged in

commerce with Thailand, Burma, Cambodia and Japan. For more than a century the Portuguese dominated trade with Africa and India while the Spanish raced to colonise the New World, a process that had begun in 1492 with the voyage of Christopher Columbus. The irony of Columbus' voyage was that, by sailing west, he too hoped to reach Cipangu (Japan) and India. Columbus, believing that the earth was round but miscalculating its circumference, believed until his death that he had reached Asia during his voyage; though in fact he had reached only the Bahamas.

The great age of maritime exploration was not confined to the European powers. During the early years of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Chinese emperors launched a number of expeditions led by the incomparable Admiral Zheng He (1371–1434). Zheng, the son of a Muslim from Yunnan province, began his career at the age of 12 as a court eunuch. He distinguished himself in a number of military posts and became a favourite of Emperor Yongle (r.1403–24). Yongle restored China to a position of economic and military strength and selected Zheng to lead a series of maritime expeditions to unite the countries of South and Southeast Asia under Chinese hegemony. Between 1405–33, under the emperors Yongle and Xuande (r.1425–35) – with a brief suspension of operations under Hongxi (r.1424–25) – Zheng led seven different voyages. They were truly epic in both scale and reach: the first, in 1405, involved more than 60 ships – the largest 130 m in length – carrying 27,000 men. The flotilla left Suzhou and travelled for two years, exploring the coastlines of Vietnam, Java, Sumatra, Malacca, Sri Lanka and south-western India. But his subsequent voyages were even more noteworthy. His fourth expedition, from 1413–15, was a round trip of 12,000 km, stopping at Hormuz in the Persian Gulf. Part of the fleet then sailed down the Arabian coast as far as Dhofar and Aden, and went on to explore the east coast of Africa, almost as far south as Mozambique – some 80 years ahead of the Portuguese. Part of the expedition even made a detour by land to visit Mecca and Egypt. When the fleet returned to China in 1415 it brought envoys from more than 30 countries to pay homage to the Chinese court, as well as a rich cargo that included a giraffe. His final expeditions all revisited the Persian Gulf and the east African coastline and, although the voyages did not result in the establishment of permanent settlements in the places he visited, they undoubtedly contributed to the diaspora of Chinese to the countries of Southeast Asia that occurred in later years. Zheng's voyages also sought to advance China's commercial interests – his ships carried cargoes that included raw and embroidered silks, porcelain, pearls, musk, camphor, precious metals, rice, millet

and beans. He returned to China with spices, gems, medicines, pigments and exotic animals – both as tribute and as the proceeds of barter with the countries along the route.

Zheng died in 1434 and China's status as a great sea power was lost as the country began to fold in on itself. Chinese merchants continued to trade but without official approval. The Portuguese arrived on the coast of southern China in 1517 and, despite being regarded with undisguised contempt by the Chinese, succeeded in establishing a trading port at Macau in 1557. From their bases at Goa and Macau, the Portuguese controlled most of the maritime trade with the East but the Spanish sought access as well. Their efforts, ironically, were assisted by the Portuguese navigator Ferdinand Magellan. Magellan approached the king of Portugal with a scheme to sail around the coast of South America but, unable to arouse interest in the plan, was eventually commissioned by King Charles I of Spain to sail west in search of spices. After rounding Cape Horn Magellan traversed the Pacific and reached the Philippines. He was killed in the Philippines in 1521 but this did not prevent the establishment of trading ports at Manila and in the Moluccas Islands in Indonesia. From these bases the Spanish conducted a lucrative trans-Pacific trade via Mexico and Peru to Europe. Goods were carried overland from one side of Mexico to the other, where, at the port of Veracruz, they were put on ships bound for Spain. The Portuguese continued to dominate trade across the Indian Ocean but from 1624 onwards Chinese merchants also traded with the Dutch in Formosa (Taiwan). In 1580 Portugal was annexed by Spain but Spanish ambitions to dominate trade with the East were short-lived. Sir Francis Drake's defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 put paid to Spanish control of the seas and ushered in the era of the great English and Dutch trading companies. Throughout this period the cities of the Silk Road, starved of revenue from land-based commerce, began to wither and die.

# Chronologies China

NEOLITHIC CULTURES c.6500–1900 BC

## EARLY DYNASTIES

**Shang** c.1500–1050 BC

**Western Zhou** 1050–771 BC

### **Eastern Zhou**

Spring and Autumn 770–475 BC

Warring States 475–221 BC

## IMPERIAL CHINA

**Qin** 221–207 BC

### **Han**

Western Han 206 BC–AD 9

Xin (Wang Mang interregnum) AD 9–23

Eastern Han AD 25–220

### **Three Kingdoms**

Shu Han 221–63

Wei 220–65

Wu 222–80

### **Period of Disunity:**

#### **Southern dynasties (six dynasties)**

Western Jin 265–316

Eastern Jin 317–420

Liu Song 420–79

Southern Qi 479–502

Liang 502–57

Chen 557–89

**Sixteen Kingdoms** [Chinese appellation for period when a succession of nomadic groups fought for control of northern China] 304–439

#### **Northern dynasties**

Northern Wei 386–534

Eastern Wei 534–550

Eastern Wei	534–550
Western Wei	535–557
Northern Qi	550–77
Northern Zhou	557–81
<b>Sui</b>	589–618
<b>Tang</b>	618–907
<b>Five dynasties</b>	907–60
<b>Liao</b>	907–1125
<b>Song</b>	
Northern Song	960–1126
Southern Song	1127–1279
<b>Jin</b>	1115–1234
<b>Yuan</b>	1279–1368
<b>Ming</b>	1368–1644
<b>Qing</b>	1644–1911
<b>REPUBLICAN CHINA</b>	
Republic	1912–49
People's Republic	1949–current

## Pre-Islamic States of Western and Central Asia

Achaemenian Empire	c.550–330 BC
Alexander the Great	336–323 BC
Seleucid Empire	c.312–64 BC
Parthian Empire	c.256 BC–AD 226
Mauryan Empire	c. fourth–second century BC
Greco-Bactrian kingdom	c. third–second century BC
Scythians	c. second–first century BC
Xiongnu confederation	c. fourth century BC–c. first century AD
Kushan Empire	c. first century BC–fourth century AD
Sasanian Empire	224–651
Hepthalites ('White Huns')	c. fourth–sixth century AD
Sogdian states	c. second–eighth century AD
Western Turks	c. fifth–seventh century AD

## Islamic States

### Arabian Peninsula

Rule of the Rightly Guided	632–61
Caliphs in Arabia	

Umayyad Caliphate	661–750
Abbasid Caliphate	749–1258
<b>Egypt</b>	
Tulunid dynasty	868–904
The Ikhshidids	935–69
The Fatimids	909–1171
The Ayyubids	1168–1260
The Mamluks	1252–1517
<b>Persia and Transoxiana</b>	
The Samanids	875–999
The Tahirids	821–73
The Saffarids	867–908
The Seljuks	1037–1194
The Kharakhanids	992–1211
The Kharakhitai (non-Muslim state)	c.1124–1210
The Khorezmshahs	1157–1231
The Zangids	1127–77
The (Mongol) Il-Khans	1256–1335
Timurids	1370–1506
The (Uzbek) Shaibanids	1428–1599
The Safavids	1502–1722
<b>Turkey</b>	
Seljuk Sultanate of Rum	1194–1243
Ottoman Sultanate	1300–1924
<b>Afghanistan and India</b>	
Ghaznavids	977–1186
Ghurids	1100–1215
Mughal Empire	1526–1857

## **Emperors of Byzantium** (Adapted from Kelly, 1987)

<b>Constantine dynasty</b>	
Constantine I	324–37
Constantius II	337–61
Julian	361–3
<b>[Non-dynastic emperors]</b>	

Jovian	363–4
Valens	364–78
<b>Theodosian dynasty</b>	
Theodosius I	379–95
Arcadius	395–408
Theodosius II	408–50
Pulcheria	450–3
Marcian	450–7
<b>Leonine dynasty</b>	
Leo I	457–74
Zeno	474–91
Leo II	
<b>474</b>	
Anastasius I	491–518
<b>Justinian dynasty</b>	
Justin I	518–27
Justinian I	527–65
Justin II	565–78
Tiberius	578–82
Maurice (married Tiberius's daughter)	582–602
<b>[Non-dynastic emperor]</b>	
Phocas	602–10
<b>Heraclian dynasty</b>	
Heraclius	610–41
Constantine II	
<b>641</b>	
Constantine III	641–68
Constantine IV	668–85
Justinian II	685–95 and 705–11
<b>[Usurpers during reign of Justinian II]</b>	
Leontius	695–8
Tiberius	698–705
<b>[Non-dynastic emperors]</b>	

Philippicus Bardanes	711–13
Anastasius II	713–16
Theodosius II	716–17
<b>Syrian dynasty</b>	
Leo III	717–41
Constantine V	741–75
Leo IV	775–80
Constantine VI	780–97
Irene (as Regent and then Empress)	780–802
<b>[Non-dynastic emperors]</b>	
Nicephorus I	802–11
Stauracius	

## 811

Michael I	811–13
Leo V (the Armenian)	813–20
<b>Phrygian dynasty</b>	

Michael II (the Stammerer)	820–9
Theophilus (the Unfortunate)	829–42
Michael III (the Drunkard)	842–67

<b>Macedonian dynasty</b>	
Basil I	867–86
Leo VI (the Wise)	886–912
Alexander	886–913
Constantine VII (Porphyrogenitus)	913–59

### **[Usurpers during and after reign of Constantine VII]**

Romanus	919–44
Romanus II	959–63
Nicephorus II	963–9
John Tzimiskes	969–76

### **Macedonian dynasty continued**

Basil II (the Bulgar-slayer)	976–1025
Constantine VIII	1025–8
Zoe	1028–50

Romanus III	1028–34
Michael IV	1034–41
Michael V	1041–2
Zoe and Theodora (jointly)	

## 1042

Constantine IX Monomachus	1042–55
Theodora (as sole empress)	1055–6

### [Non-dynastic emperors]

Michael VI Stratioticus	1056–7
Isaac I Komnenos	1057–9
Constantine X Dukas	1059–67
Romanus IV Diogenes	1067–71
Michael VII Parapinakes	1071–8
Nicephorus III Botaniates	1078–81

### Comnenus dynasty

Alexius I	1081–1118
John II	1118–43
Manuel I	1143–80
Alexius II	1180–3
Andronicus I	1183–5

### Angeli dynasty

Isaac II Angelus	1185–95 and 1203–4
Alexius III	1195–1203
Alexius IV	1203–4

### [Usurping emperor]

Alexius V Dukas	
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## 1204

### Latin emperors installed by the Crusaders

Baldwin of Flanders	1204–5
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Henry of Flanders	1206–16
Peter de Courtnay (never ruled)	

## 1217

Yolande	1217–19
Robert II of Courtnay	1221–8
Baldwin II	1228–61
John de Brienne (Regent)	1229–37

### **Byzantine emperors exiled at Nicaea during the Latin occupation of the city**

Theodore I Lascaris	1204–22
John III Dukas Vatatzes	1222–54
Theodore II	1254–8
John IV	1258–61

### **Byzantine emperors restored: Palaeologian dynasty**

Michael VIII	1261–82
Andronicus II	1282–1328
Michael IX	1295–1320
Andronicus III	1328–41
John V	1341–91

### **[Usurping emperor]**

John VI Cantacuzenos	1341–54
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### **Palaeologian dynasty continued**

Andronicus IV	1376–9
John VII	

## 1390

Manuel II	1391–1425
John VIII	1425–48
Constantine XI	1449–53

### **Ottoman sultans immediately after the capture of Constantinople in 1453**

Mehmet II the Conqueror (Fatih)	1453–81
Beyazit II	1481–1512
Selim I the Grim	1512–20

Selim I the Grim	1512–20
Süleyman the Magnificent	1520–66
Selim II	1566–74
Murad III	1574–95
Mehmet III	1595–1603

# Glossary

<i>abhayamudra</i>	Hand position indicating freedom from fear, or reassurance; the hand raised with the palm pointing towards the viewer.
<i>agora</i> (Greek 'meeting place')	In ancient Greek cities, an open space that served as a meeting place for the various activities of citizens. Typically the central marketplace, the equivalent of the Roman forum.
Amitabha Buddha (Sanskrit; Japanese: Amida)	The Buddha of infinite light, ruler of the pure land known as the Western Paradise.

Ananda First cousin and devoted companion of the Buddha.  
*apsaras* or *apsara* (Sanskrit) Female semi-divinity, or celestial nymph.

Aramaic	One of the major systems of writing in the Middle East during the first millennium BC. It derived from Semitic script and became the <i>lingua franca</i> of merchants in the region.
<i>arhat</i> (Sanskrit; Chinese: <i>Lohan</i> ; Japanese: <i>Rakan</i> )	A Buddhist holy figure who has gained insight into the true nature of existence and has achieved nirvana.
Ariadne (Greek mythology)	The daughter of Pasiphae and the Cretan king, Minos, <i>inamorata</i> of the Athenian hero Theseus.
Athena (Greek mythology)	The goddess of war and city protectress, identified by the Romans with Minerva.
Atlas (Greek mythology)	Son of the titan, Iapetus, and the nymph, Clymene, and brother of Prometheus. In Homer's works he supported the pillars that separated heaven and earth.
<i>avadanas</i> (Sanskrit 'noble deeds')	The Buddha's explanations of events by means of an individual's worthy deeds in a previous life. The most important avadana is an account of miraculous events in the life and former lives of the Buddha himself.
Avalokitesvara (Sanskrit)	A celestial <i>bodhisattva</i> , the archetype of universal compassion. In his female form, he is associated with Tara and Guanyin.
<i>balbals</i>	Grave-markers, once erected by nomadic Turks above the graves of their companions to designate how many of the enemy the occupant had slain.
<i>bodhisattva</i>	One destined for Buddhahood, eligible to enter nirvana, but who elects to remain a <i>bodhisattva</i> in order to help living beings attain salvation.

Brahma	Hindu deity, a member of the puranic trinity (the Trimurti), associated with creation.
Brahmins (Hindu priests)	The priestly caste of Hindus (although not all Brahmins are priests).
<i>caitya</i> (Sanskrit 'that which is worthy to be gazed upon')	A sacred place or shrine, especially a Buddhist prayer-hall, often with a votive stupa at one end.
caliph (Arabic Khalifah, 'successor' – to Muhammad)	A ruler of the Muslim community.

caravanseraï	A public building, often fortified, used for sheltering caravans, merchants and other travellers.
cella (central sanctuary chamber)	The main body of a temple containing the image of the deity.
chaikana (or <i>chaihana</i> )	A teahouse.
chakra (or <i>Cakra</i> )(Sanskrit 'wheel')	A wheel or disc attribute of Vishnu.
<i>chiaroscuro</i> (Italian 'light and shade', or 'dark')	In painting, the modelling of volume by bold contrast of light and shade.
<i>cleruchs</i> (Greek)	War veterans, given grants of land in dependent countries of the Greek Empire.

Corinthian	A type of pillar, one of the three classical orders of Greek architecture, characterised by a fluted column, topped by a capital decorated with acanthus leaves.
Da Qin (Chinese 'Great Qin')	The Chinese name for Rome or the Roman Empire.
<i>decumanus</i> (Latin 'main road')	The main east–west thoroughfare in a Roman city.
<i>deva</i> (Sanskrit 'The Shining One', female: <i>devata</i> )	A deity or god, an inhabitant of the heavenly realms.
<i>dharmachakramudra</i>	The gesture signifying the 'turning the wheel of the law', in which both hands are held at chest level. The tips of the thumb and forefinger of the right hand form a circle and are touched by the left hand.
<i>dhyanamudra</i>	The gesture of meditation, where the hands of a seated figure are placed in the lap, one above the other, with palms facing upwards.
Dionysos (Greek mythology)	Known to the Romans as Bacchus – the god of wine and altered states (or religious ecstasy).

Doric	A type of column, one of the three classical orders of Greek architecture. It is characterised by the absence of a base, a simple tapering column and a plain capital.
Durga (Sanskrit 'difficult to penetrate')	A Hindu goddess, the female counterpart of Siva and slayer of the buffalo demon.
<i>dvarapala</i>	Heroic door guardian or keeper of the Buddhist faith, placed in pairs at the entrances to temples.
Eros (Greek mythology)	Known to the Romans as Cupid, the god of love.
<i>farsakh</i> (Persian, also <i>parasang</i> or <i>farsang</i> )	The distance that a laden mule will walk in an hour, varying from about 5–6 km.
<i>Fravashis</i>	In the Zoroastrian religion, the <i>Fravashis</i> (singular: Fravartin) are guardian angels or protecting spirits who guide the souls of the departed to heaven. The <i>Fravashis</i> assisted Ahura Mazda, the supreme Zoroastrian divinity, in the creation of the world, and are also the defenders of heaven.
<i>gandharvas</i> (Sanskrit)	Male celestial deities, sometimes known as musicians of the gods.

Ganesha	The elephant-headed son of the Hindu god Siva.
Garuda (Sanskrit)	Mythical bird, often depicted in part human form. Garuda is the mortal enemy of the nagas and is also the mount of the Hindu god Vishnu.
<i>ghat</i> (Hindi)	A landing place with steps on the banks of a river. A flat area at the top of the steps, used by Hindus as a place for cremation, is known as a burning <i>ghat</i> .
<i>ghazal</i>	A short-lyric love poem, often treated symbolically.
<i>girikh</i> ('Persian knots')	Geometrical arabesque decoration in Islamic architecture.
<i>gonbad</i> (Persian)	Dome.
<i>hadiths</i> (Arabic 'news or story')	Collection of traditions or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, regarded by Muslims as a source of moral guidance. The authority of the <i>hadiths</i> is second only to that of the Qur'an.
<i>hamsa</i> (Sanskrit)	A mythical semi-divine goose; the mount of the Hindu god Brahma.
Harpocrates (Greek 'Horus the child')	The Greeks' name for the Egyptian sky god Horus, represented as a small boy with his finger held to his lips. Harpocrates was regarded as the god of silence and was popular throughout the Roman Empire.
<i>haveli</i>	In India, a mansion or small palace.
Herakles (Greek mythology)	Known as Hercules to the Romans, Herakles was the illegitimate offspring of Zeus and Alkmene, granddaughter of Perseus. He was honoured as a hero throughout the Greek world, and after his death by poisoning he was granted immortality among the gods.
Hermes (Greek mythology)	Son of Zeus and Maia, the daughter of the titan Atlas, Hermes is identified with the Roman god Mercury. He is worshipped as the god of fertility, as the protector of travellers and roads, and as the conveyor of souls to the underworld. He was also the messenger of the gods and is often depicted wearing winged sandals or a winged hat.
<i>hierothesion</i> (Greek 'the temple-tomb and common dwelling place of all the gods')	A sacred tomb sanctuary.
Hinayana (Sanskrit 'lesser path' or 'vehicle')	Older school of Buddhism, popular in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma, in which the routes to salvation are more limited than those of the rival, Mahayana school. Also known as the Theravada ('path of the elders') school.
Hu (Chinese, possibly derives from <i>rou</i> – 'meat', or <i>yue</i> – 'moon')	General name applied in ancient China to the peoples living along the country's northern frontier.
<i>hypogeum</i> (Latin, plural <i>hypogea</i> )	An underground burial chamber.

intaglio A hollow relief carving, commonly used for engraved seals and gems, in which a positive imprint is formed when pressed onto heated wax.

Ionic	A type of column, one of the three classical orders of Greek architecture. Ionic columns generally have a fluted shaft and a capital usually decorated with two scroll-like designs (volutes).
<i>iwan</i>	A covered or vaulted hall, open at one end, in a mosque or palace.
<i>kala</i> (Turkish)	A fortified settlement.
<i>karaburan</i> (Turkish)	A strong, warm wind that blows over Central Asia. It often carries fine-grained soil which is deposited as loess.
<i>kariz</i> (Persian – also called <i>kyariz</i> or <i>qanats</i> )	Underground water conduits for irrigation.

Kasyapa	An Indian ascetic who converted to Buddhism late in life and, along with Ananda, became one of the Buddha's key disciples.
khagan (or khan)	King or ruler.
<i>khan</i>	A lodging place or inn for travellers and merchants. They are analogous to caravanserais (q.v.) but are generally located within towns.

Kharosthi	Writing system used in north-western India before about AD 500, probably derived from Aramaic script and influenced by another Indian script, Brahmi.
<i>khuriltay</i> (Mongolian)	Proceedings attended by all minor and major Mongol leaders, as well as shamans, to appoint a new Great Khan.
<i>kirttimukha</i> (Sanskrit 'face of glory')	A horned demon or lion mask used as a decorative device above temple doors and windows.

Kubera In Hinduism, the king of nature spirits, or yakshas and the god of wealth. Known as Jambhala in Buddhism.

Kufic	The earliest form of Arabic script, characterised by an angular style and used in inscriptions on Islamic buildings and coins.
<i>kurgan</i> (Turkish and Russian) Barrow, artificial burial mound. <i>lalitasana</i> (Sanskrit)	The position of 'royal ease', in which one leg is placed parallel to the ground and the other is pendant.
<i>limes</i> (Latin 'path', plural <i>limites</i> )	Originally a strip of open land used by Roman troops to advance into hostile territory. The word subsequently came to be used to mean a military road, strengthened with a line of watchtowers and fortifications, or a natural or artificial frontier.

loess	Wind-borne dust from desert or vegetation-free areas at the margins of ice sheets. Loess deposits in north-west China can exceed 150 m in depth and have created vast fertile areas.
<i>lokapala</i> (Sanskrit and Pali)	A 'heavenly king' who protects one of the four cardinal directions.
<i>madrasah</i>	A Muslim religious school.
Mahayana (Sanskrit 'greater vehicle' or 'path')	The school of Buddhism most prevalent from Nepal to Japan, and therefore also known as northern Buddhism – in contrast to the older, 'southern' Hinayana form. Its principal tenet is that salvation is open to all and may be attained rapidly with the assistance of <i>bodhisattvas</i> .
Maitreya (Sanskrit 'friendliness'; Japanese: Miroku)	The Buddha of the Future, now residing as a <i>bodhisattva</i> in Tushita heaven, but who will become incarnate when the teachings of Sakyamuni have become forgotten.
<i>mandala</i> (Sanskrit 'disk' or 'circle')	In Hinduism and Buddhism, a cosmic diagram, used as an aid for meditation. A <i>mandala</i> is essentially a representation of the universe, a collection point of universal forces.

Manichaeism	A religion influenced by both Gnosticism (a religious movement of the early Christian era rooted in paganism and magic), and Christianity itself. It originated in Persia around AD 230, founded by Mani (AD 216, or AD 217–76) and spread across Asia and the Roman Empire, surviving in the far west of China until the thirteenth century. It is based on the struggle between the forces of Light (the Spirit) and Darkness (the Flesh).
Manjusri (Sanskrit; Chinese: Wenshu; Japanese: Monju)	In Mahayana Buddhism, the <i>bodhisattva</i> , personifying supreme wisdom.
mantra (Sanskrit)	A sound expressing the deepest essence of understanding, the recitation of which is believed to evoke a state of enlightenment or intense positive energy.

Mara	The 'Lord of the Senses' who attempted to distract the Buddha as he sat beneath the Bo tree awaiting enlightenment.
<i>masnavi</i> (Arabic 'the doubled one')	A continuous narrative poem with rhyming couplets.
<i>mawali</i> (Arabic)	Clients or subjects – non-Arab converts to Islam, often treated as second-class citizens.
<i>mehrab</i> (Arabic)	A niche in the wall of a mosque that indicates the direction of Mecca.
<i>minai</i>	Islamic pottery with polychrome enamel painting, and sometimes gilding, on a white ground.
Mithra, Mithraism	Pre-Zoroastrian religion in ancient Persia, involving the worship of Mithra, god of light, justice and war. Mithra's slaying of the cosmic bull appears frequently in the art of the classical world. Mithra was associated with the Greek sun god Helios and often appears with Anahita, goddess of the waters.
<i>muezzin</i> (Arabic muaddin)	In Islam, the official who proclaims the call to prayer.
mullah (Arabic <i>mawla</i> , or <i>mawlay</i> 'Protector')	In different parts of the Islamic world it may denote a king, sultan, scholar or religious leader. The most common usage is for religious leaders, scholars of Islam and teachers in religious schools.

Naskhi	Cursive style of Islamic script.
Nestorius, Nestorianism	Early Christian doctrine, named after Nestorius, Roman Catholic patriarch of Constantinople, who was expelled from the Church in 432 for heresy. It held that Christ has two natures – one human and one divine. His followers took Nestorianism eastwards from the sixth century onwards and it survived in parts of China until the fourteenth century.
Nike (Greek mythology)	The winged goddess of victory.
nirvana (Sanskrit 'blowing out' or 'extinction')	Extinction of the fires of greed, hatred and ignorance, when perfect knowledge is attained and the cycle of earthly rebirths ceases.
<i>ostraka</i>	Inscribed tile or pottery fragments.

<i>pagoda</i>	A brick, stone or wood tower of several storeys, erected to house relics of the Buddha. It evolved from the stupas (q.v.) of India.
<i>paizi</i> (or <i>gerege</i> )	Metal plaques of gold, silver or iron issued by the Mongols as badges of office and to travellers on state business.
<i>parinirvana</i> (Sanskrit)	The moment when the Buddha finally exits this world and enters nirvana.

Parthian Shot      A cavalry tactic, also popular as an artistic motif, in which a hunter shoots backwards from a galloping horse.

pendentive    An architectural device consisting of a spherical triangle that fills the space between the corner of the rectangle and the base of the dome.

Phrygian cap	A conical wool or felt headdress with a pointed crown, originating in Phrygia in Asia Minor.
<i>pishtaq</i>	A formal gateway or monumental portal.
<i>propylae</i>	The entrance gates to an enclosure (usually to the precincts of a temple).
<i>puṛnaghata</i>	Vase-of-plenty, often used as a decorative element.
<i>putto</i> (plural <i>putti</i> )	Chubby, cherub-like young boys, frequently depicted with wings, appearing in paintings and sculpture.
<i>qibla</i>	Direction of prayer – the side of a mosque facing the Black Stone in the Ka’ba in Mecca.
<i>rabat</i> (or <i>ribat</i> )	A fortified monastery or frontier post, with both religious and military functions, found throughout the Muslim Empire.
<i>rhyta</i> (or <i>rhytons</i> ) (Greek)	An animal or horn-shaped vessel for libations.
<i>rubaiyat</i> (Persian ‘quatrains’)	In Persian poetry, rhyming quatrains most famously used by Omar Khayyam (c.1048–c.1131).

Sakyamuni	Title of the historical Buddha.
<i>sangharama</i> (or <i>vihara</i> )	A Buddhist monastery.
Seres (Latin 'country of silk')	The name given by the Romans to China.

Serindia	Term deriving from Seres, referring to the region of Chinese Central Asia traversed by the Silk Road and influenced by the cultures of both China and India.
Sevener Shi'ites	A subset of the Ismaili Shi'ites who believed that Ismail (the seventh descendant of the Prophet's son-in-law Ali) was also the seventh and last imam. They also believed that Mohammad at-Tamm, the son of Ismail, would return at the end of time as the Chosen One (al-Mahdi).
<i>sgraffito</i> (Italian)	Decoration applied by first covering the body of the vessel with a white slip and then creating the design by scratching through it with a sharp point to create a line drawing.
<i>shahrستان</i>	The old inner part of a town.
<i>shanyu</i> (Chinese)	High chieftain among the nomads of the Ordos region of China's northern frontier.

Siddhartha	The personal name of the historical Buddha.
Silenus (Greek mythology)	An elderly satyr (male fertility spirit), companion to Dionysos.
Siva (or Shiva, Sanskrit 'beneficent one')	One of the principal Hindu deities, a member of the trinity known as the Trimurti, characterised by a cosmic energy that manifests itself as both a destructive and creative force.

squinch	An arch that spans each corner of a square building to facilitate the transition from a square to a round or polygonal base for a dome.
stupa	A Buddhist structure of Indian invention in the form of a mound or dome, built to house relics of the Buddha.
Surya (Sanskrit)	The Hindu god of the sun, often depicted as a charioteer.
sutra (Sanskrit 'thread')	A category of Buddhist scripture, believed to have been the words of the Buddha himself.

synodiarch	A merchant in charge of a caravan.
Tantric Buddhism (Tantra is Sanskrit for 'loom')	Also called Esoteric or Vajrayana ('Diamond Vehicle') Buddhism; a form of Mahayana Buddhism developed in Tibet and making use of mystic and astrological texts, mantras and <i>mandalas</i> .
<i>temenos</i> (Greek)	A sacred temple enclosure.
<i>themes</i> (Latin)	Large military districts created by the Byzantines as a buffer against Islamic expansion.

Theravada	See Hinayana.
<i>tiraz</i> (Persian ‘embroidery’)	Textiles embroidered with an inscription in silk thread, usually a laudatory message referring to the name, accomplishments and regnal dates of the caliph or other ruler.
<i>togatus</i> (Latin ‘toga wearer’)	A philosopher or statesman.
<i>torana</i> (Sanskrit)	In Indian architecture, a gateway, especially to a Buddhist stupa.
Transoxiana (In Arabic Mawana’an nahr: ‘what is beyond the river’)	Important historical region in Central Asia, the lands between the Amu Darya (Oxus) River and the Syr Darya (Jaxartes) River.
<i>ulus</i> (Mongolian)	Territory or dominion of the Mongol khans.
<i>urna</i> (Sanskrit)	A tuft of hair between the eyebrows, often represented as a dot, that denotes a great man – particularly with regard to the Buddha.
<i>usnisha</i> (Sanskrit ‘that which is on top’)	A raised chignon or cranial bump indicative of princely origins and superior wisdom, particularly with regard to the Buddha.
Vairocana (Sanskrit)	The most important of the five cosmic Buddhas, often represented at the centre of a <i>mandala</i> .
Vajrapani (Sanskrit ‘thunderbolt bearer’ or ‘diamond bearer’)	A celestial <i>bodhisattva</i> , the manifestation of Aksobhya, Buddha of the East.
<i>vihara</i> (Sanskrit)	A Buddhist monastery or a hall in a monastery.
Vimalikirti	Indian sage, renowned for his skill in debate.

Vishnu	Along with Siva and Brahma, one of the three members of the Hindu trinity (the Trimurti), who appears as ten different avatars or manifestations, most notably Rama and Krishna.
<i>yaksha</i> (Sanskrit, female: <i>yakshi</i> )	Nature or fertility deities found in both Hinduism and Buddhism.
Zeus (Greek mythology)	Supreme god in the Greek pantheon, the protector and ruler of humankind, identified by the Romans with Jupiter.

Zoroastrianism A pre-Islamic religion, founded in ancient Persia during the sixth century BC by Zoroaster (or Zarathustra). Its basic beliefs concern the struggle between good and evil, light and darkness.

Notes Introduction: Merchants, Monks and Migrants: The Traffic of the Silk Road <sup>1</sup> Seres ('the country of silk') was the name given by the Romans to China. Their notion of how silk was obtained was patchy at best. Pliny wrote, 'the Seres are famous for the wool of their forests. They remove the down from leaves with the help of water'; and Virgil thought that 'the Chinese comb off leaves their delicate down' (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*).

<sup>2</sup> For a more extensive list of Chinese inventions, see the companion volume to this book: *The Silk Road – China and the Karakorum Highway: A Travel Companion*. The examples given are abridged from from Joseph Needham, 1954.

**1 The Old Road Through Afghanistan to India** **1 For photographs of Hadda, taken when the reliefs still existed, see the following link:**  
[http://www.bamiyan.de/index\\_e.html](http://www.bamiyan.de/index_e.html)

- 2 The remaining artefacts in the museum's collection were believed to have been destroyed on the instructions of the Taliban government in March 2001, along with the Buddhas of Bamiyan. In a miraculous twist, after the Taliban were removed from power it was discovered that many of the museum's most precious objects (including the great Tillya Tepe gold hoard), had been removed for safe keeping to the vaults of the National Bank. From 2003–6 some US\$350,000 was spent refurbishing the building. nevertheless, some 70 per cent of the 100,000 objects once held by the museum have disappeared. For more on the Kabul museum, see the following link:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Museum\\_of\\_Afghanistan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Museum_of_Afghanistan)
- 3 The first words of the inscription on Babur's gravestone.

**3 The Coming of Islam to Central Asia** **1 The continued existence of a small pocket of Sogdian speakers in the Yagnob valley of modern Tajikistan is one of the twentieth century's most exciting discoveries.**

- 2 For more on the Shoso-in, see the accompanying volume to this book: *The Silk Road – China and the Karakorum Highway: A Travel Companion*.
- 3 Musk is an aromatic substance used in the production of perfumes. It is secreted by an abdominal gland in the male musk deer.
- 4 Ambergris is a grey secretion obtained from the intestines of the sperm whale. It was also used in the production of perfumes – giving permanence to fragrances obtained from flowers. As well as being extracted from the bodies of captured whales the substance is washed ashore, especially on the islands of the South Seas and on the coast of Africa, or is found floating in the ocean. Arab traders peddled the substance along the Silk Road and appear to have disguised its origins – Persian scholars believed that it came from a spring beneath the ocean and the Chinese thought it was the spittle of dragons. Perfumes and other aromatics were an important part of religious ritual and were also an aphrodisiac for well-to-do gentlemen and ladies of the countries along the Silk Road. There are so many tales of the role of perfumes in courtship and love-making that one (related in Schafer, 1963) will have to

suffice here. A beautiful Chinese courtesan in eighth-century Changan (Xian), who went by the name of 'Lotus Fragrance', is said to have worn a perfume of such delightful aroma that when she promenaded about the town besotted bees and butterflies followed her about.

- 5 *Sgraffito* decoration was applied by first covering the body of the vessel with a white slip and then creating the design by scratching through it with a sharp point to create a line drawing.
- 6 Phyllis Ackerman, quoted in Liu, 1996.
- 7 The word 'Cathay', long used by Europeans as a term for China, derives from the tribe's name.

#### **4 The Mongols 1 William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, Act IV, Scene 2.**

- 2 For an excellent interactive map showing the extent of the Mongol Empire from its foundation in 1206 to its division into khanates by 1294, see the following link: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mongol\\_Empire\\_map.gif](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mongol_Empire_map.gif)
- 3 Tana is Azov, a town just east of the Black Sea.

**6 The Silk Road Sites Between Balkh and Nisa 1 *The Parthian Stations*, written by Isidore of Charax during the first century AD, is believed to have been commissioned by the Roman emperor, Augustus. The work lists places and distances along the trade routes from Mesopotamia to Central Asia.**

**7 The Route North from Merv to Khorezm 1 Urgench in Uzbekistan is of relatively recent vintage, only fully coming into its own when the population of Kunya ('Old') Urgench was displaced by water shortages in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Kunya Urgench is located 200 km to the north-west, in modern Turkmenistan.**

- 2 For a shocking perspective on just how far Moynaq is now separated from the sea, see the following Google Earth link: <http://goo.gl/maps/ENt0>

**8 The Routes North from the Iron Gate Pass 1 These verses were written to persuade the Samanid Emir Nasr II to return to Bukhara from Herat where, to the dismay of his courtiers, he had become ensconced. The Ju-yi Muliyan is another name for the Oxus (Amu Darya) River.**

- 2 Neoplatonism was developed in the third century AD by Plotinus, who saw reality as one vast hierarchical order containing all the various levels and

types of existence.

**9 The Routes to the North-West from Bukhara to Khorezm 1** For an illustrated discussion of the Orlat plaques, see the following link:

<http://www.transoxiana.org/Eran/Articles/mode.html>

- 2 This mural can be seen in the companion volume to this book: *The Silk Road – China and the Karakorum Highway: A Travel Companion*, Figure 9. The Afrasiab murals are open to various interpretations – for a summary, see the following link: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/afrasiab-ii-wall-paintings-2>.
- 3 For more on the Hepthalites, see the companion volume to this book: *The Silk Road – China and the Karakorum Highway: A Travel Companion*.

**10 Silk Road Sites Around Samarkand 1** For more on Penjikent, including drawings of some of the murals, see:

<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/panjikant>

- 2 For more on Fondukistan and Kizil see the companion volume to this book: *The Silk Road – China and the Karakorum Highway: A Travel Companion*.
- 3 From Ferdowsi [Ferdosi], *The Epic of Kings: The Shanama*. Translated by Reuben Levy in Ferdowsi, 1967.
- 4 For more on the Yaghnobi people, including a recording of a poem read in the dialect, see the following link: <http://yaghnobi.wordpress.com/tag/yagnob/>

**11 The Silk Road Between Samarkand and China 1** For more on Emperor Wudi and his heavenly horses, see the accompanying volume to this book: *The Silk Road – China and the Karakorum Highway: A Travel Companion*.

- 2 The distance that a laden mule will walk in an hour, varying from about 5–6 km.
- 3 For more on Balasagun and its *Balbal* markers, see the accompanying volume to this book: *The Silk Road – China and the Karakorum Highway: A Travel Companion*.
- 4 Khurasan (‘Land of the rising sun’) is now Iran’s largest province, although it used to comprise a much greater area. It included Afghanistan and Central Asia as far as the Oxus River and was the eastern part of the former Sasanian Empire.

**12 Parthians and Sasanians 1** For more on Emperor Wudi and Chinese contacts with Mithradates, see the accompanying volume to this book: *The Silk Road – China and the Karakorum Highway: A Travel Companion*.

- 2 There is considerable debate regarding the origin of this vessel – see, for example, p. 99 in Juliano and Lerner, 2001.
- 3 For more on Persian refugees in Xian, see the accompanying volume to this book: *The Silk Road – China and the Karakorum Highway: A Travel Companion*.

**13 The Main East–West Silk Road Across Iran 1** A covered or vaulted hall open at one end.

- 2 The Turcomans are thought to be descended from the nomads of the Mongol Altai region. There are several million in the region – most residing in Turkmenistan – but more than 1 million live in Iran, mainly in the north-eastern part of the country.
- 3 For more on the late Louise Firouz and her efforts to revive ancient breeds, see the following link: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louise\\_Firouz](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louise_Firouz)
- 4 Richard Frye (1976) makes the point that many of the cities attributed to Alexander the Great were, in many instances, not true cities nor were they founded by him – they were simply military centres established to control strategic routes and, in many cases, were built on the site of existing, Achaemenian, garrison towns.
- 5 Not to be confused with the ancient trading port of Charax Spasini, at the head of the Persian Gulf, just south of Basra.
- 6 *The Parthian Stations*, probably written just before the birth of Christ, is a rare account of the post-stations on the ancient caravan trail between Antioch and the borders of India. Little is known about its author, Isidore of Charax. It appears that he was born in Charax Spasini, just south of Basra in modern Iraq, and may have been commissioned by the Roman emperor, Augustus, to produce the work. Only fragments of it have survived, but the names of the post-stations along the route and the distances between them have enabled historians to make inferences about the relations between the Parthians and their neighbours. For a detailed account of *The Parthian Stations*, see the following link: [http://www.parthia.com/doc/parthian\\_stations.htm](http://www.parthia.com/doc/parthian_stations.htm)

**14 The Ray–Tabriz Road 1 The Royal Road: the Achaemenian king, Darius the Great (522–486 BC), constructed the Royal Road between Susa – the ancient capital of Persia – and Sardis (east of modern Izmir in Turkey). It extended over a distance of more than 2,400 km with post-stations along the way. The Greek historian Herodotus wrote admiringly of the kings’ messengers, who covered the entire distance in nine days and were delayed by ‘neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night’. Alexander the Great followed parts of the Royal Road during his campaigns against the Persian Empire, and a large section of the Silk Road through Turkey corresponds to the ancient route.**

**2** ‘China’s realm’ means Chinese Central Asia or Chinese Turkestan.

**3** Khallukh (presumably as in ‘Karluk’ Turk) was a town in the Central Asian steppe famous for the beauty of its women.

**4** For more of Gertrude Bell’s delectable translations of Hafiz’s poetry, see the following link: <http://tinyurl.com/bn59moj>

**15 The Ray–Hamadan Road 1 Other authorities say Shapur III was Ardeshir II’s son and Shapur II’s grandson.**

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